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JERUSALEM IN THE ALPS

The Sacro Monte of Varallo and the
Sanctuaries of North-Western Italy

by

Geoffrey Symcox



BREPOLS

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CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	vii
Preface and Acknowledgements	xi
Chapter 1. Samuel Butler Encounters the Sacri Monti	1
Chapter 2. The Val Sesia: Society and Politics	19
Chapter 3. The Foundation of the Sacro Monte of Varallo	41
Chapter 4. The Sixteenth Century: From Gaudenzio Ferrari to Carlo Borromeo	71
Chapter 5. The Seventeenth Century: The Era of the Counter-Reformation	123
Chapter 6. The Eighteenth Century: The Val Sesia under the House of Savoy	175
Chapter 7. Varallo as Model: The Later Sacri Monti	205
Epilogue. Revolution and Restoration	261

Appendix 1. Caimi's Plan for the Sacro Monte, Varallo	269
Appendix 2. Plan of the Sacro Monte Varallo: Present State	271
Bibliography	273
Index of Persons	299
Index of Places	307

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Maps

Map 1. Map of north-west Italy showing the Sacri Monti.	2
Map 2. Plan of the Sacro Monte of Varallo, present state.	270

Figures

Figure 1.1. The Sacro Monte of Varallo, from below.	9
Figure 2.1. Map of the Val Sesia, c. 1690.	18
Figure 2.2. View of Varallo by Johann Blasius Manauft. 1688.	35
Figure 3.1. Inscription above the Entrance to the Chapel of the Holy Sepulchre, Sacro Monte of Varallo.	50
Figure 3.2. Façade of the Chapel of the Holy Sepulchre, Sacro Monte of Varallo.....	54
Figure 3.3. Entrance to the Tomb in the Chapel of the Holy Sepulchre, Sacro Monte of Varallo.	56
Figure 3.4. Figure of the Dead Christ in the Chapel of the Holy Sepulchre, Sacro Monte of Varallo.	57
Figure 3.5. Fountain of the Risen Christ, Sacro Monte of Varallo.	63

Figure 4.1. Gaudenzio Ferrari, <i>The Life of Christ</i> . 1513. Fresco cycle in Santa Maria delle Grazie, Varallo.	79
Figure 4.2. Chapel of the Nativity, Sacro Monte of Varallo.	81
Figure 4.3. Chapel of the Crucifixion, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Exterior, showing the loggia constructed in the nineteenth century.	83
Figure 4.4. Chapel of the Crucifixion, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Interior.	84
Figure 4.5. Chapel of the Crucifixion, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Detail: the Virgin Mary and two Mothers.....	86
Figure 4.6. Chapel of the Crucifixion, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Detail: Soldiers at the foot of the Cross.....	87
Figure 4.7. Samuel Butler and the statue of Stefano Scotto in the Crucifixion Chapel, Sacro Monte of Varallo.	88
Figure 4.8. Procession, Chapel of the Crucifixion, Sacro Monte of Varallo.	90
Figure 4.9. Chapel of the Magi, Sacro Monte of Varallo.....	91
Figure 4.10. Galeazzo Alessi, Plan for Octagonal Piazza, Sacro Monte of Varallo.....	102
Figure 4.11. Galeazzo Alessi, Project for the Inferno, Sacro Monte of Varallo.	104
Figure 4.12. Galeazzo Alessi, Project for a Glass Screen for a Chapel, Sacro Monte of Varallo.	106
Figure 4.13. Galeazzo Alessi, Worshipper at the Screen of a Chapel.	107
Figure 4.14. Galeazzo Alessi, Portal of the Sacro Monte, Varallo.	108
Figure 4.15. Galeazzo Alessi, Chapel of the Fall of Man, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Exterior.	110
Figure 4.16. Galeazzo Alessi, Design for the figures in the Chapel of the Fall of Man, Sacro Monte of Varallo.	111

Figure 4.17. Frontispiece of <i>Breve Descrizione del Sacro Monte di Varallo in Valsesia</i> (Novara: Francesco Sesalli, 1566).	112
Figure 5.1. Chapel of the Massacre of the Innocents, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Detail.	135
Figure 5.2. Chapel of the Ascent to the Cross, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Onlookers and Panel depicting Abimelech.	139
Figure 5.3. Chapel of the Ascent to the Cross, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Detail: Christ and Veronica.	140
Figure 5.4. Piazza dei Tribunali, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Tribunals of Herod and Caiaphas.	142
Figure 5.5. Palace of Pilate, Sacro Monte of Varallo.	142
Figure 5.6. The Scala Santa, Sacro Monte of Varallo.	144
Figure 5.7. Chapel of the Crowning with Thorns, Sacro Monte of Varallo.	147
Figure 5.8. Chapel of the Ecce Homo, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Christ on the Balcony.	148
Figure 5.9. Chapel of the Ecce Homo, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Detail: Barabbas.	149
Figure 5.10. Chapel of the Condemnation of Christ, Sacro Monte of Varallo.	151
Figure 5.11. Chapel of the Condemnation of Christ, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Detail: Ceiling.	151
Figure 5.12. Chapel of Christ's First Appearance before Pilate, Sacro Monte of Varallo.	153
Figure 5.13. Chapel of the Deposition, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Figures below the Cross.	158
Figure 5.14. Chapel of the Deposition, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Detail: Two old men.	158

Figure 5.15. Chapel of the Pietà, Sacro Monte of Varallo.....	160
Figure 5.16. Piazza of the Basilica, Sacro Monte of Varallo.	163
Figure 5.17. The Sacro Monte of Varallo. 1671. Frontispiece of Giovanni Battista Fassola, <i>La Nuova Gierusalemme o sia il</i> <i>Santo Sepolcro di Varallo</i> (Milan: Federico Agnelli, 1671).....	170
Figure 6.1. Chapel of the Last Supper, Sacro Monte of Varallo.....	185
Figure 6.2. Dome of the Basilica, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Interior.	186
Figure 6.3. High Altar and Tribuna of the Basilica, Sacro Monte of Varallo.....	187
Figure 6.4. Casket of the Virgin Mary in the Crypt, Sacro Monte of Varallo.	188
Figure 6.5. Glass Canopy over the Virgin Mary in the Crypt, Sacro Monte of Varallo.....	188
Figure 7.1. Francis before the Bishop of Novara. Sacro Monte of Orta, Chapel 3.	211
Figure 7.2. Chapel of the Death of Francis. Sacro Monte of Orta, Chapel 16.	214
Figure 7.3. Chapel of the Canonization of Saint Francis. Sacro Monte of Orta, Chapel 20.	216
Figure 7.4. Basilica and Cloister, Sacro Monte of Oropa.	223
Figure 7.5. View of the Sacro Monte of Oropa, c. 1675.	227
Figure 7.6. Porta Regia, Sacro Monte of Oropa.	228
Figure 7.7. Church of the Trinity, Sacro Monte of Ghiffa.	230
Figure 7.8. Processional Way, Sacro Monte of Varese.	233
Figure 7.9. Chapel of the Crucifixion, Sacro Monte of Varese.....	240
Figure 7.10. Statue of San Carlo Borromeo, Arona.	256

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The origin of this book goes back to an excursion I made many years ago to the Sacro Monte of Varallo with my friend Franco Inguaggiato. It was summer, and I was hard at work on my research in the archives in Turin. The city is hot and humid in the summer months, and one Sunday, when the archives were closed, Franco proposed a trip to the mountains to escape the heat. We drove up to the little town of Varallo, found the Sacro Monte and wandered in through the gateway, to discover a wonderland of chapels housing life-size figures depicting scenes in the life of Christ. I was mystified and captivated: this was unlike any religious art I had ever encountered. A couple of weeks later we drove up to Orta and visited the Sacro Monte overlooking the beautiful lake: we were confronted by the same strange spectacle of classical tabernacles with frescoes and painted terra-cotta figures, this time recounting the life of St Francis of Assisi. Again, I was captivated. Since that time I have returned many times to Varallo and the other Sacri Monti: this book is the result of those journeys.

Some years ago my colleague David Sabeau prevailed on me to present a paper at a conference he was organizing on sacred spaces. I thought back to Varallo and Orta, and produced a very sketchy account of the two Sacri Monti that had enchanted me. That paper has become the germ of this book, infinitely expanded by years of research in various archives — Varallo, Turin, Milan, Novara — where I encountered unfailing courtesy and helpfulness from the archivists and their assistants. A period at the American Academy in Rome, for which I am very grateful, made it possible for me to tap the endless resources of the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana and the Biblioteca Hertziana at the German Institute. In Los Angeles I have had the good fortune to be able to draw on the resources of the Getty Research Institute, and the Research Library at UCLA, where the staff of the Interlibrary Loan Desk always dealt patiently with my requests for obscure foreign books and journals.

In the course of my research I gradually became aware that the English man of letters Samuel Butler occupies a crucial place in the history of the Sacri Monti, for his role in publicizing the Sacri Monti to an audience far beyond the alpine valleys where they lay hidden from the view of connoisseurs and tourists. When I mentioned to friends in Turin that I was working on a research project on the Sacri Monti, they smiled quizzically and asked if I intended to become the new Samuel Butler. At first I missed their point; up to then I knew Butler only as the author of *Erewhon* and *The Way of All Flesh*, and I wondered what on earth those works had to do with the Sacri Monti. Eventually the light dawned. I realized that my friends were referring to his two books, *Alps and Sanctuaries* and *Ex Voto*, which remain the starting-point for modern scholarship on the Sacri Monti. Butler therefore occupies an important place in this book. Some of his judgements have been proved wrong, some of his views now seem dated, but the basis of his work remains valid. He is the pioneer who first made practitioners of the emerging field of art history aware of these artistic treasures hidden away in their alpine fastnesses.

Here I must record debts of gratitude to friends and colleagues who have helped me in bringing this project to a conclusion. First, to Dr Guido Gentile, the greatest expert on the Sacri Monti, who encouraged me, gave me books unobtainable in the United States, and aided me in my archival research. To my friend Dr Marco Carassi, former director of the Archivio di Stato in Turin, who introduced me to Dr Gentile and facilitated my work in the archives then in his charge; to Dr Gianpaolo Garavaglia and Dr Piera Mazzone, director of the Biblioteca Civica Farinone-Centa of Varallo, for their help during my visits to Varallo; to Dr Elena De Filippis, director of the Sacro Monte, who gave me access to the Crucifixion chapel there and permission to take photographs. My further thanks go to my colleague Peter Stacey, for our conversations about my research; to Rebecca Gill, for our discussions about Galeazzo Alessi's work at Varallo; and to Claudius Weykonath for our discussions about the liturgical purpose of the Sacro Monte at Varallo. Finally, my gratitude goes to Nicholas Terpstra and Louis Marchesano, who read sections of this book and offered helpful criticisms. To all, grazie di cuore.

Geoffrey Symcox
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SAMUEL BUTLER ENCOUNTERS THE SACRI MONTI

Butler's Intellectual Odyssey

The English artist and man of letters Samuel Butler (1835–1902) first visited the Sacro Monte at Varallo in 1871, it seems by accident, in the course of a summer ramble through the western Italian Alps.¹ This initial encounter fired his enthusiasm and sent him on a series of explorations across the alpine foothills of western Lombardy and northern Piedmont over the next two decades. In the course of his wanderings, and especially during his stays in the Val Sesia and its chief town, Varallo, Butler came into contact with a number of local scholars and men of letters who were eager cultivators and celebrators of their region's history and artistic heritage. Butler — who spoke fluent Italian — became friends with many of these local *eruditi* and learned a great deal from them; he also fell into conversation with the people he happened to meet on the road and at the inns where he stayed. The knowledge and insights he gained from these friends and acquaintances led him to compose two books, *Alps and Sanctuaries* (1881), and *Ex Voto* (1888), that brought the region's sanctuaries — the Sacri Monti — to the attention of the world at large. In these two works Butler described the unique art he found in these sanctuaries: sequences of chapels filled with life-size painted terra-cotta figures backed by panoramas of frescoes, depicting religious scenes. Butler's books put the Sacri Monti on the cultural map and created an audience for them extending across Europe and as

¹ I use the term Sacro Monte (plural Sacri Monti) for the sanctuaries of the Western Alps, as Butler does, rather than translating it as 'holy mountains'.



Map 1. Map of north-west Italy showing the Sacri Monti. Adapted from Santino Langé, *Sacri Monti piemontesi e lombardi* (Milan: Tamburini, 1967), pp. 50–51.

far as America. Before Butler, the Sacri Monti were virtually unknown to the outside world; afterwards, they became the goal of tourists and art connoisseurs, drawn by his enthusiastic descriptions of the art and the people of the region. And his work also stimulated Italian critics and art historians beyond the alpine region to take a closer look at the unique cultural achievement that the Sacri Monti represented.

Butler was a complex personality with notably eclectic interests. Novelist, creator of utopian fantasies; travel writer; classical scholar and translator of Homer; painter and photographer; musician; mountaineer and tireless traveller; follower, then critic of Darwin; religious controversialist: in a word, an avowed contrarian, a vigorous polemicist who revelled in combat on all fronts. Today Butler is perhaps best known as a leading critic of the psychological repression inflicted by the patriarchalism and religiosity of his age, which he knew all too well from personal experience, and which he depicted unsparingly in his autobiographical novel, *The Way of All Flesh* (1903), and the deadpan

irony of his painting, *Family Prayers* (1864). He was in sum the consummate Victorian anti-Victorian, a man of paradox and contradiction, at once pontificator and provocateur. Very much a product of his upbringing in the high Victorian era, he would hold forth confidently on all manner of subjects, while at the same time, with the liberal deployment of his favourite pejorative, ‘humbug’, he would delight in subverting the pieties and proprieties his contemporaries held dear. His two books on the Sacri Monti owe their origin in part to this taste for controversy; in them he lovingly celebrated the art of a region ignored by conventional critics, whose judgements he disdained.

It is Butler as alpine traveller, art critic, and popularizer of the Sacri Monti who concerns us here. From early boyhood he was fascinated by the landscape, art and people of Italy. Born into a clerical household of comfortable means, he received his grounding in the Italian language at an early age when his parents took him on three extended tours of the peninsula, following the prescribed itinerary of great artistic sites: Florence, Milan, Venice, Rome, Naples. From 1854 to 1858 he studied classics at St John’s College, Cambridge. His father intended him to follow in his footsteps and enter holy orders, but Butler rebelled and instead departed for New Zealand, where he acquired a sheep farm and ran it for five years. Its mountainous surroundings became the setting for his utopian fantasy *Erewhon*, a world turned upside down, where laws and morals are inverted, industry and machines are banished, and the inhabitants live happy, peaceful lives. *Erewhon*’s imaginary landscape was also based on places in Italy he held dear: the region of Domodossola, the Lombard plain seen from Varese, and the valley of the Leventina near Faido, which became the ‘headquarters’ for his peregrinations through the Western Alps.² *Erewhon* was published in 1872 to critical acclaim, launching Butler on his literary career. None of his later works would achieve any comparable degree of success, however, except for *The Way of All Flesh*, published posthumously. His two books on the Sacri Monti, though well received by the critics, did not sell well.

Butler’s sheep-farming venture in New Zealand was profitable, and he returned to England in 1864 with the means to pursue his vocation, which was — despite his father’s opposition — to become a painter. He enrolled at Heatherley’s Academy in London, and his experience as a student there, together with his unsuccessful attempts to win recognition by the Royal Academy, were decisive influences shaping the outlook that inspired his works on the Sacri Monti: outright rejection of the painterly conventions taught in

² Butler, *Erewhon*, p. 46; Festing Jones, *Samuel Butler*, I, 284.

the academies, and of the theories propagated by the emerging discipline of scientific art criticism. The thwarting of his ambition to be a professional painter, and the failure of his bid to become Slade Professor of Art at the University of Cambridge in 1886, soured him on the contemporary art world and turned him into the champion of the art he had encountered in the sanctuaries of the Western Alps. One could speculate that if Butler had received the Slade professorship, his artistic interests might well have shifted into other directions, and that he would never have written *Ex Voto*.

He set out his views on art in the central chapter of *Alps and Sanctuaries*, significantly entitled 'Considerations on the Decline of Italian Art'.³ This decline, Butler contended, was due to the dead hand of the academy, whose origins he traced to the Carracci studio in late sixteenth-century Bologna. He argued that by teaching students to copy the old masters, rather than nature, the academy stifled creativity, leading to the production of a formulaic art, technically competent but devoid of inspiration. Against the highly finished works of academically trained painters, Butler extolled the 'primitive' art he encountered in the Sacri Monti. He praised it as the work of artists rooted in their local communities and uncontaminated by the academy, and not the product of the individualistic striving 'for money and applause'.⁴ The art of the Sacri Monti was spontaneous, original, alive, and, in Butler's over-enthusiastic view, superior to the work of the greatest masters of the Renaissance.⁵

Butler's enthusiasm for the supposedly untutored artists whose work he encountered at Varallo and the other Sacri Monti extended to other 'lower' forms of art — magazine illustrations, caricatures, ex-votos — which he praised for their vigour and originality, but which contemporary critics deemed unworthy of attention. A telling example of this view is the verdict on Gaudenzio Ferrari's Crucifixion chapel at Varallo by the art historian Albert von Zahn, in his new edition (1869) of Jacob Burckhardt's *Der Cicerone* (1855). After praising Gaudenzio's frescoes in the chapel as a 'masterpiece', von Zahn pronounced that it was 'impossible' that the terra-cotta figures in the chapel could also be his work: they were beneath the dignity of such a great master, even if he was working with assistants. (Von Zahn was wrong. Both the figures and the frescoes are by Gaudenzio).⁶

³ Butler, *Erewhon*, pp. 120–35; Shaffer, *Erewhons of the Eye*, chap. 1; Zdanski, 'Samuel Butler'.

⁴ Butler, *Alps and Sanctuaries*, p. 121.

⁵ Samuel Butler, *Ex Voto*, p. 62.

⁶ Burckhardt, *Der Cicerone*, ed. by von Zahn, III, 881. Von Zahn described Gaudenzio's

Orthodox art criticism, exemplified by von Zahn, required that statues be fashioned from the noble materials of polished marble and bronze, and disdained a 'popular' medium like painted terra-cotta. For the critics, terra-cotta figures were a kind of pottery, a genre to be classified among the decorative arts, or as a mere handicraft. High art demanded marble and bronze; clay was plebeian. As one prominent critic magisterially observed, the figures at Varallo were fit only for exhibition at Madame Tussaud's waxworks.⁷ Butler disagreed, vigorously. The 'lower' art-forms, and above all the painting and sculpture he found in the sanctuaries of the Western Alps, were vibrant with energy and originality. In his eyes, they offered an antidote to the deadening influence of the academy, and he went so far as to argue that they held out the hope of a true artistic Renaissance.

Butler had no sympathy for the leading critics of his day. His early enthusiasm for Ruskin, whose work he had read while a student at Cambridge, had long since faded. He actively disliked the work of Walter Pater (1839–94) whose *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) dwelt exclusively on the transcendental achievements of the great masters. (Pater reciprocated with the faint praise he accorded one of Butler's heroes, the artist Gaudenzio Ferrari,

frescoes as a 'spätes Hauptwerk von grösster Fülle des Ausdrucks und entschlossenster Breite der Darstellung. Dagegen können die Thongruppen welche die Mitte der betr. Cappellen einnehmen, unmöglich F's eigenes Werk sein, auch wenn er sie im Accord mit übernommen haben sollte'. Burckhardt's comment in the original edition of the *Cicerone* (1855) reads very differently: 'in Varallo: die Capella del Sacro Monte, wo die Malerei zu bemalten plastischen Gruppen bildet, dergleichen auch in den Capellen des Stationenweges stehen': Burckhardt, *Der Cicerone*, in *Werke*, III, 123. In a letter to von Zahn from 22 October 1868, Burckhardt declares he would take no part in the new edition and left it entirely to him (p. 408). Von Zahn's comment appears verbatim in the English translation, *The Cicerone, or Art Guide*, p. 116: Gaudenzio's frescoes are 'a late masterpiece of great fullness of expression, and the most energetic breadth of representation. On the other hand, the groups in terra cotta which occupy the centre of the chapel cannot possibly be Ferrari's own work, even if he undertook them in partnership with some one else'.

⁷ In 1861, during a tour of the Alps, Sir Charles Eastlake, director of the National Gallery, observed in his notebook: 'The Sacro Monte is an absurd exhibition of painted and clothed statues in the style of Madame Tussaud's (but very inferior) except that the subjects are sacred.' Cited by Bertelli, 'La riscoperta', p. 23. On the adverse nineteenth-century judgements of this sculptural genre, see Verdon, *The Art of Guido Mazzoni*, pp. xi–xiii; Cannon-Brookes, 'The Sacri Monti of Lombardy and Piedmont', p. 288. Boucher, *Earth and Fire*, the catalogue of an exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 18 November 2001 to 2 February 2002, only mentions the works at Varallo in passing (p. 27).

who worked at the Sacro Monte of Varallo).⁸ Butler took issue with the eminent critic Sir Austen Henry Layard (1817–1894), who in 1887 published a new edition of the German scholar Franz Kugler's *The Italian Schools of Painting*. Originally dating from 1837 and translated into English by Lady Elizabeth Eastlake in 1874, it had become a standard work of reference. In his new edition of Kugler, while loftily praising Gaudenzio Ferrari's paintings at Varallo 'as not unequal to the works of the best period of the Venetian school', Layard — like Von Zahn — belittled the terra-cotta statues in the chapels there: 'the bad taste of the colour and clothing make them highly repugnant to the cultivated eye.'⁹ Butler was predictably incensed. After citing this damning phrase verbatim in the preface to *Ex Voto*, he excoriated Layard for his numerous errors of fact, for his ignorance of which artists had actually worked at Varallo, but above all for his condescending dismissal of what Butler believed were great works of art. Had Layard ever actually visited Varallo, he wondered?¹⁰ In short: Butler rejected the 'cultivated' gaze of the scientific art historian Layard, and the idealizing vision of the self-described 'aesthetic critic' Pater. Instead, he advocated what he called the 'ignorant eye', unencumbered by accepted standards of taste, its field of vision unrestricted by the established canon.¹¹ It was this ignorant eye that he brought to bear on the art of the alpine sanctuaries.

Butler's method also differed fundamentally from that of the established critics. He rejected the contemporary mode of art history, which divided painters into regional schools, arranged them according to a teleological schema derived from Vasari, and laid down a canon of the great artists worthy of attention.¹² This canon was incorporated into the guide-books, like Burckhardt or Baedeker or Murray, that were coming into general use and, in Butler's view, regimenting public taste.¹³ Layard — following Kugler — placed Renaissance painting in a Vasarian continuum moving towards ever-greater technical mastery and range of expression. For Pater the art of the great masters was a disem-

⁸ Pater, 'Art Notes in North Italy' (this essay written in 1889), pp. 93–94.

⁹ Layard, *Handbook of Painting*, II, 426.

¹⁰ Butler, *Ex Voto*, pp. 2–6. Layard had in fact visited Varallo in 1856.

¹¹ Pater described his method as 'aesthetic criticism': Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy*, p. 214. On Butler's 'ignorant eye', as distinct from the 'innocent eye' of Ruskin, see Shaffer, *Erewhons of the Eye*, pp. 70–71. Bertelli, 'La riscoperta', p. 31, incorrectly equates Butler's 'ignorant eye' with the lens of his camera.

¹² For example, the approach in Crowe, *A New History of Painting in Italy*.

¹³ Bellorini, 'L'Italia di Samuel Butler', p. 149.

bodied emanation of the spirit of the Renaissance, whose origins he traced back to the schoolmen of the twelfth century and which culminated in the early sixteenth century. Bernard Berenson (1865–1959), an admirer of Pater who was fast becoming the dominant influence in scientific art criticism, sought to analyse paintings with the eye of the connoisseur, penetrating an artist's character in order to understand his work, while unravelling how much it owed to earlier painters.¹⁴

Butler's approach was very different. For him, context was crucial. In his two works he portrayed the artists of the Sacri Monti as the products of the communities in which they lived. They were not aesthetic abstractions but beings of flesh and blood, following the artistic traditions of their homeland, and realistically depicting their fellow citizens in their works.¹⁵ Theirs was an honest, organic art rooted in the community where they lived, infinitely removed from the stifling confines of the academy. In his own drawings and paintings of the landscape and people of the Val Sesia,¹⁶ Butler paid homage to the simple faith and communal sense of the country folk. His enthusiasm for the alpine region and its art and its people, whom he tended at times to idealize — or even sentimentalize — may have led him to overstate his case. But his rejection of the accepted modes of art criticism in his works on the Sacri Monti produced 'a remarkable piece of art-historical research' characterized by its 'freshness and enthusiasm'.¹⁷

Here we should take note of Butler's choice of locale for his artistic explorations, which was not at all accidental. He deliberately stayed far off the beaten track followed by tourists in pursuit of great art. Although he knew Italy well — he called it his second homeland — he did not spend time in the cities frequented by British and American tourists and art-fanciers, in the hothouse atmosphere of Rome or Florence or Venice. His contrarian nature drew him to less-travelled regions, in search of artists whose names did not figure in the guide-books. He preferred northern Italy and its art, undervalued by critics in thrall to Vasari's paradigmatic view of the superiority of central Italian and especially Tuscan art. His penchant for northern Italy may also have stemmed from his delight in alpine scenery, lyrically evoked in *Alps and Sanctuaries* and *Ex Voto*, and lovingly depicted in the sketches and photographs with which he illustrated these two works.

¹⁴ Berenson, *Lorenzo Lotto*, 'Introduction'.

¹⁵ Bertelli, 'La riscoperta', p. 24.

¹⁶ See, for instance, 'The Christening at Fobello' (1871).

¹⁷ Cannon-Brookes, 'Varallo Revisited', p. 108.

But one suspects too that it sprang from a distaste for the tourists and expatriates who by now formed sizeable colonies in the major artistic centres, whom E. M. Forster would soon satirize in *A Room with a View*.¹⁸ Butler makes constant references to the ignorance and uncouthness of the ordinary English tourists he met on his travels, and he did not share the aesthetic enthusiasms of their more educated countrymen. These he considered false and contrived, examples of the humbug he anatomized so pitilessly in *The Way of All Flesh*.¹⁹ We may suspect too that his rather prickly, diffident character was uncomfortable in such company: Butler described himself as a 'very solitary Ishmaelite', and his friend and biographer Henry Festing Jones records that 'Butler was seldom at his ease when with a celebrated man'.²⁰ So year after year, his inclinations took him far from the established artistic itineraries and the colonies of expatriates, to the valleys and villages of the Western Alps, where he consorted happily with the local people, notables and commoners, learned and unlettered alike.

Butler Explores the Sacri Monti

Butler was by no means the first British traveller to explore the western Italian Alps and revel in the dramatic scenery, the picturesque towns and hamlets, and the folkways of a hardy people still scarcely touched by the inroads of modern industry and communications.²¹ In the 1820s the artist William Brockedon scoured the region in a search for traces of Hannibal's route into Italy; he published his *Journals of Excursions in the Alps* in 1833. James David Forbes, professor of natural science at the University of Edinburgh, conducted numerous expeditions to study the region's glaciers, which he described in *A Tour of Mont Blanc and the Monte Rosa* (1855). Some of these visitors were intrepid lady travellers like the mountaineering Pigeon sisters, Anna and Ellen, who made the first descent of the Sesia-Joch from Switzerland into the Val Sesia in 1869. The foundation of the British Alpine Club in 1857 gave added impetus to these

¹⁸ It was published in 1908. Besides Fraser, among the recent literature on tourists and expatriates, see Buzard, *The Beaten Track*, and Downing, *Queen Bee of Tuscany*.

¹⁹ Butler, *The Way of All Flesh*, chap. 4 describes the posturing of George Pontifex (a thinly disguised portrait of Butler's father) in the presence of alpine scenery and celebrated works of art.

²⁰ In his letter to Mr. O. T. J., 17 February 1902, cited in Festing Jones, *Samuel Butler*, II, 382. On Butler's 'unease' at meeting Edward Lear in 1879, see Festing Jones, *Samuel Butler*, I, 306.

²¹ Rizzi, *Storia della Valsesia*, pp. 391–99.



Figure 1.1. The Sacro Monte of Varallo, from below. Photo by the author.

explorations and publications. One of its earliest members, Leslie Stephen — an indefatigable scaler of peaks and the future editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography* — dubbed the Alps the ‘Playground of Europe.’²² Another member, Sir Henry Cole, visited the Val Sesia in 1856 and 1858 with his wife Eliza, who described their travels in *A Lady’s Tour around the Monte Rosa* (1859). Contemporaneously the reverend Samuel King, antiquarian, geologist, and botanist, also accompanied by his wife, was tramping through the Val Sesia and its neighbouring valleys. He wrote a perceptive account of what they saw in *The Italian Valleys of the Pennine Alps* (1858) and noted that tourism at Varallo was growing rapidly.²³ Butler would cite King’s book approvingly in *Ex Voto*.²⁴ A few years later Sir Charles Eastlake, the newly appointed director of the National Gallery in London, and his wife Elizabeth visited Varallo in the course of an expedition through northern Italy to acquire pictures for the national collection.²⁵

²² Stephen, *The Playground of Europe*; cf. Mathieu, ‘The Sacralization of Mountains.’

²³ King, *The Italian Valleys of the Pennine Alps*, p. 498.

²⁴ Butler, *Ex Voto*, chap. 2.

²⁵ He was appointed in 1855, and thereafter spent the summers travelling in Europe to buy paintings, much of his time being spent in Italy: Avery-Quash and Sheldon, *Art for the Nation*,

Butler first came to the Val Sesia in 1871, after trekking over the St Gotthard pass to Bellinzona — the railway tunnel would not open until 1882 — and then making his way to Arona on Lake Maggiore. Having heard about the art of the Sacro Monte of Varallo he decided to add the Val Sesia to his itinerary.²⁶ At Varallo he lodged at the Albergo d'Italia and became fast friends with its proprietor, Carlo Topini, who introduced him to Dionigi Negri, the secretary of the municipality and an expert on the Sacro Monte.²⁷ Negri took Butler on a guided tour of the sanctuary on the steep hill above the town, with its forty or so chapels, each one housing a tableau of painted terra-cotta figures backed by frescoes recounting an episode in the life and Passion of Jesus Christ. On the Sacro Monte of Varallo Butler encountered a type of art he had never seen before, and he was instantly enthralled. It would become the consuming passion of his artistic life for the next twenty years.

Butler's voyage of discovery through the alpine sanctuaries had begun. He returned to Varallo the following year, and after 1876 made regular visits to the Western Alps each summer, sketching, painting, and making careful notes wherever he went. During his later excursions he also took many photographs; he was in fact the first person to photograph the chapels of the Sacro Monte.²⁸ Starting out from Faido in the Canton Ticino, which 'though politically Swiss is as much Italian in character as any part of Italy', he explored an arc of territory stretching from Lake Como and Varese in the east to the mountaintop sanctuary of San Michele west of Turin.²⁹ The first fruit of these labours was *Alps and Sanctuaries*, published in 1881, a collection of essays on the places he had visited and studied, interspersed with chapters on people he had met along the way. In it he recounted a conversation with a friendly parish priest at Calonico, the time he spent with the monks at San Michele, an outing with the sculptor Spartaco Vela and his friends at Ligornetto. Butler was obviously enjoying himself wherever he went. In a letter to his friend Edna Savage, he reported feeling 'a hundred times better than when I left England'.³⁰

He was an acute and sympathetic observer of local customs and everyday life. Visiting the sanctuary at Oropa he noted the efficiency of the arrangements

pp. 134–51.

²⁶ Festing Jones, *Samuel Butler*, I, 145–46.

²⁷ Durio, *Samuele Butler*, pp. 10–11.

²⁸ Bertelli, 'La riscoperta', p. 26.

²⁹ Butler, *Alps and Sanctuaries*, p. 6.

³⁰ Butler to Edna Savage, 10 June 1877, from Faido, cited in Festing Jones, *Samuel Butler*, I, 251.

for feeding and lodging the pilgrims, and the holiday atmosphere of the place. Families came up from the hot, malarial plains to enjoy 'the bracing mountain air', and, after making 'a slight show of pilgrimage' by making the round of the chapels, spent their time 'in doing absolutely nothing [...]'. We saw scores of people just resting instinctively in a kind of waking dream'.³¹ For Butler, a Protestant whose faith had faded, this innocent enjoyment was a reaffirmation of the humanism he had come to espouse in its stead, and of his sympathy for the deep, unquestioning faith of the local people, so much at odds with the intolerance in which he had been reared. In another instance he described seeing some of the congregation at the village of Rossura kneeling on the church steps during mass because there was no room inside: 'I never saw anything more beautiful — and these forsooth are the people whom so many of us think to better by distributing tracts about Protestantism among them'.³²

In *Alps and Sanctuaries* Butler did not describe the Sacro Monte of Varallo, the oldest, the most important sanctuary in the region, and the progenitor of all the others. In the preface he explained that 'I found it impossible to deal with Varallo without making the book too long. Varallo requires a work in itself'.³³ After the publication of *Alps and Sanctuaries* he continued his annual visits to the Western Alps, spending most of his time at Varallo in the company of his circle of friends, and carefully studying the chapels. In 1885 he was present at the celebrations for the 400th anniversary of the birth of Gaudenzio Ferrari (1485–1546), the great Valsesian artist whose work, especially the frescoes and figures in the chapel of the Crucifixion, set the pattern for the subsequent artistic development of the Sacro Monte. On 1 September 1887, Butler's friends gave a banquet in his honour at the hotel on the Sacro Monte. Afterwards Butler remarked to his travelling companion Henry Festing Jones: 'Well, after this you know, the next thing I do must be my book about the Sacro Monte'.³⁴

On his return to London, Butler set to work. In the winter of 1887–88 he returned to Varallo to photograph the chapels, to provide illustrations for his new book, *Ex Voto*. It saw the light of day in May 1888.³⁵ Butler dedicated it

³¹ Butler, *Alps and Sanctuaries*, pp. 161–62.

³² Butler, *Alps and Sanctuaries*, p. 33.

³³ Butler, *Alps and Sanctuaries*, p. xxiii.

³⁴ Festing Jones, *Samuel Butler*, II, 88. Durio, *Samuele Butler*, p. 15, prints the list of the twenty-six local notables who attended.

³⁵ Bertelli, 'La riscoperta', p. 26. The dim light forced him to use long exposures.

(in Italian) ‘to the people of Varallo and the people of the Val Sesia.’³⁶ It is very different from its predecessor. Whereas *Alps and Sanctuaries* is a travel book, *Ex Voto* is a work of art history and criticism, based on Butler’s close examination of the monument itself and his reading of all the published source materials then available. In it he recounts the history of the sanctuary from its foundation at the end of the fifteenth century, drawing on the pioneering research of his friend Pietro Galloni, the director of the Sacro Monte. He then examines the sequence of chapels and analyses the work of the artists who created them. Gaudenzio Ferrari figures prominently; Butler was determined to rescue him from the obscurity in which he languished at that time. He described Gaudenzio’s Crucifixion chapel at length, and in striking contrast to the judgement of Albert von Zahn, praised the execution of both the frescoes and the figures. He identified one of them as a portrait of Gaudenzio’s teacher, Stefano Scotto, and photographed himself standing next to it.³⁷ But by this time he had come to believe Gaudenzio was outshone by a hitherto unknown, even more brilliant artist, whom he had discovered in the course of his investigations: the transplanted Flemish sculptor Jean de Wespín, or Tabaguet, known in Italy as Tabacchetti (c. 1568–1615). He had modelled the figures for the chapel of the Ascent to Calvary at Varallo at the end of the sixteenth century, and later worked at the nearby sanctuary of Crea. Unfortunately Butler’s account of Tabacchetti’s work was marred by errors of chronology and attribution. He initially believed Tabacchetti was still working in 1640 (he died in 1615), and so gave him credit for works that were in fact by the Valsesian sculptor Giovanni d’Enrico (c. 1559–1644), whom Butler judged to be an inferior artist. In fact the masterpiece he claimed for Tabacchetti, the old man — ‘Il Vecchietto’ — shading his eyes as he gazes up at the dead Christ in the Deposition chapel, which he photographed with loving care, is by d’Enrico.³⁸

Despite these errors, some of which Butler later corrected, *Ex Voto* represented an important advance in the history of the Sacro Monte of Varallo and the critical appreciation of its artistic heritage. It was the first study of the subject in English, and together with *Alps and Sanctuaries* it brought Varallo and the Sacri Monti to the attention of a new audience, far beyond the confines of the region. It motivated some discerning travellers to visit Varallo, their

³⁶ Butler, *Ex Voto*, p. xiii.

³⁷ Butler, *Ex Voto*, p. 160, prints the photograph (see here Fig. 4.7).

³⁸ Butler, *Ex Voto*, frontispiece. In the preface to the 1894 edition of *Ex Voto* Butler corrected this error (see here Figs 5, 2, and 3).

journey now eased by the opening of the railway link from Novara in March 1886. Reading *Ex Voto* must have inspired Pater's visit in 1889, and certainly led to Edith Wharton's in 1894.³⁹ The English art historian Constance Jocelyn Ffoulkes visited Varallo in 1892, the American painter Edward Lord Weeks in 1897, the German art historian Gustav Pauli about the same time.⁴⁰ Taking her cue from Butler, a few years later the English art historian Ethel Halsey travelled to Varallo in the course of her research on Gaudenzio Ferrari; published in 1904, her book is the first — and still the only — monograph in English devoted to him.⁴¹ An Italian translation of *Ex Voto* was published in 1894, through the good offices of Butler's friend Pietro Galloni.⁴² Butler's work, he said, had inspired him to 'extend his own investigations into the sanctuary', leading to his two studies of its art and history published in 1904 and 1909, which for a long time remained the standard works of reference.⁴³

Butler's work also made an impact in France. The expatriate Russian princess Marie Ouroussov published a brief illustrated work on Gaudenzio Ferrari at Paris in 1902. The art historian Gabriel Faure (1877–1962) visited Varallo in 1910, but he did not share Butler's enthusiasm for what he found there: to him, the statues resembled those in the waxworks at the Musée Grévin.⁴⁴ Valéry Larbaud (1881–1957), a prolific man of letters who greatly admired Butler, translated several of his works into French, including *Alps and Sanctuaries*. The historian of art and literature Louis Gillet (1876–1943) retraced Butler's alpine travels and published his own history of the Sacri Monti in 1928. Although he found that Butler's work was riddled with errors, due to the fact that Butler was only an 'amateur' in the field of art criticism, he pronounced that 'he has rendered the service of calling attention to this forgotten art'.⁴⁵

For Butler, the most exciting result of his research at Varallo was the discovery of Tabacchetti's work there and at the nearby sanctuary of Crea. He had learned about Tabacchetti's work at Crea from a study by Alessandro Godio, published in 1887. Butler devoted two entire chapters of *Ex Voto* to celebrat-

³⁹ Levey, *The Case of Walter Pater*, p. 105; Wharton, *Italian Backgrounds*, pp. 58–59.

⁴⁰ Bertelli, 'La riscoperta', pp. 31–39.

⁴¹ Halsey, *Gaudenzio Ferrari*, p. xiii: the bibliography specifically mentions Butler.

⁴² Rizzetti's translation of *Ex Voto* was published in 1894.

⁴³ See the preface to Galloni, *Sacro Monte di Varallo*.

⁴⁴ Faure, *Heures d'Italie*, III, 51.

⁴⁵ Gillet, *Dans les montagnes sacrées*, p. 17.

ing Tabacchetti.⁴⁶ He was deeply moved by the dramatic crowd of figures in the chapel of the Ascent to Calvary at Varallo, which Tabacchetti modelled in a whirlwind of activity between 1599 and 1602. He considered it superior not only to Gaudenzio's Crucifixion chapel but even to 'Michael Angelo's Medicean chapel [which] errs on the side of over-subtlety, refinement, and the exaggerated idealism from which indeed there is but one step to the *barocco*'.⁴⁷ This last term was for Butler — as for most of his contemporaries — a damning epithet. In pursuit of his new enthusiasm, following the publication of *Ex Voto*, Butler spent the summer of 1888 at Dinant in Belgium, Tabacchetti's birthplace, where he discovered a number of documents on the history of the artist's family.⁴⁸ The Belgian scholar Marguérite Devigne would later follow up Butler's hurried archival foray with two thoroughly researched articles illuminating Tabacchetti's family background and training, and the reasons for his migration to Italy.⁴⁹

Butler now expanded his investigation into Tabacchetti's career. He visited the sanctuary of Crea in Monferrato, where Tabacchetti had worked after leaving Varallo, and made contact with a local scholar, Francesco Negri, who helped him rectify the errors in the first edition of *Ex Voto*, correcting the date of Tabacchetti's death to 1615 and abandoning some of the attributions.⁵⁰ In 1890 Butler travelled to Saas Fee in Switzerland, across the border from the Val Sesia, and declared — misled by his enthusiasm — that he could detect Tabacchetti's influence in some of the figures in the sanctuary there.⁵¹ He seems at this point to have contemplated publishing a new version of *Ex Voto*, correcting the errors and giving a much fuller treatment of Tabacchetti's work.

But this new project would prove stillborn, because of an incident at the Sacro Monte of Varallo that caused a breach between Butler and many of his friends. In 1892, thanks to the generosity of a local patron, the original wooden figure of Christ in Gaudenzio's Crucifixion chapel was taken down and replaced with a figure modelled by a local sculptor. Galloni and several of Butler's friends protested; others, however, approved the change. When he heard the

⁴⁶ Butler, *Ex Voto*, p. 100, and chaps 9 and 18.

⁴⁷ Butler, *Ex Voto*, p. 62.

⁴⁸ Butler, *Ex Voto*, p. xviii.

⁴⁹ Devigne, 'Les frères Jean, Guillaume et Nicolas de Wespin'.

⁵⁰ See the introduction by Festing Jones and Streatfield in Butler, *Ex Voto*, pp. xiii–xiv.

⁵¹ Durio, *Samuele Butler*, pp. 37–47. The carved wooden figures in the chapels there are in fact much later.

news Butler was outraged and joined in the protest, writing an angry letter to *The Times* in distant London, which was published on 17 October. As a result of the outcry, the new statue was removed, and the original one restored to its place. But the rift between the opponents and the supporters of the new figure remained. Butler was saddened and angered by what he regarded as a betrayal by those of his friends who had championed the new statue. In February 1893 he wrote to the artist Giulio Arienta, his closest friend at Varallo, that although he was relieved that the old statue had been returned to its rightful place,

nonetheless, for me Varallo is now a thing of the past [...] I can no longer trust those people, whom I would never have believed capable of such vandalism. I have no wish to come and find half my friends are cold. So I shall stay away for two or three years. A thing I can easily do, given that my work is finished, and that I have so much other work that draws me towards Greece, Asia Minor and Sicily.⁵²

These bitter words signalled Butler's definitive breach with Varallo, and the end of his investigations into Tabacchetti's career. Henceforth he would return only briefly and reluctantly to Varallo, which he now considered a 'nest of every kind of corruption and of everything that is abhorrent to an honest spirit'.⁵³ His interest in Tabacchetti had been replaced by a new, consuming passion; as he promised Arienta, his annual summer expeditions now took him to Greece and Sicily, pursuing a new project on the Homeric poems. This enterprise would culminate in his prose translations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and — contrarian to the end — in his contribution to the Homeric authorship question, *The Authoress of the Odyssey*, in which he argued that a woman from Sicily must have written the epic of Odysseus' trials and travails. His deep attachment to the Val Sesia and the Sacri Monti had foundered in the bitterness engendered by the dispute between his friends at Varallo. He never returned there to walk the mountain paths, to glory in the scenery, to paint, sketch, and take photographs. Gaudenzio and Tabacchetti had lost their charm. This was the end of Butler's affair with Varallo and the Sacri Monti that had begun two decades before. A chapter in his life had closed.

⁵² Postcard in Italian to Arienta, 28 February 1893: Durio, *Samuele Butler*, p. 97. Arienta (1826–1900) was the founder of the municipal art gallery at Varallo and the Società per la conservazione delle opere d'arte e dei monumenti in Valsesia; see Debiaggi, *Dizionario degli artisti valsesiani*, p. 7.

⁵³ Postcard in Italian to Arienta, 7 January 1898: Durio, *Samuele Butler*, p. 119.

After Butler

It is of course true that long before Butler came to Varallo, local artists and scholars had celebrated the art and the history of their *patria*. It was his two studies, however, that provided the impulse that started modern scholarship on the Sacri Monti.⁵⁴ Butler acknowledged that he was building on the work of the scholars he met and befriended at Varallo: the art historians Pietro Galloni and Dionigi Negri, the historian Federico Tonetti, the promoter of Valsesian culture Pietro Calderini, and the entrepreneur Costantino Durio.⁵⁵ But without Butler, the historical and artistic heritage they cultivated would not have become known to the wider world. Butler's work opened the study of the Sacri Monti to an audience far beyond the Val Sesia and the borders of Italy.

In his two studies, Butler deliberately set his face against the canons prevailing in his time, against connoisseurship and the exaltation of the great masters. For Butler, the artists who worked at Varallo were not to be dismissed as provincial, unrefined, and technically limited: they were to be appreciated as skilled practitioners of their craft, capable of the highest aesthetic achievement. Time has vindicated Butler. His insistence that the work of obscure alpine artists was to be taken seriously anticipates the approach of a growing number of present-day art historians who accord serious critical attention to the popular art of the Renaissance.

After Butler, amid the upheavals of the First World War and the fascist regime, few studies of the Sacri Monti saw the light of day. Scholarly research resumed only after the Second World War, spearheaded by the art historians Anna Maria Brizio and Giovanni Testori, the latter a passionate admirer of the Valsesian artists Gaudenzio Ferrari and Tanzio da Varallo. The exhibitions these two scholars curated, devoted to the work of these two artists, revived academic interest in the art of Varallo and the other Sacri Monti, opening the way for an outpouring of studies by Casimiro Debiaggi, Elena De Filippis, Luigi Mallé, Stefania Stefani Perrone, Giovanni Romano, Rossana Sacchi, and Vittorio Viale. Rudolf Wittkower published an important article on Varallo and the Sacri Monti in 1959, reviving the legacy of Samuel Butler by drawing

⁵⁴ See the introduction by Anna Maria Brizio to Alessi, *Libro dei Misteri*, ed. by Stefani Perrone, I, 3–4.

⁵⁵ Alberto Durio recalls his childhood meeting with Butler in 1890 and 1891: Durio, *Samuele Butler*, p. 20. His father Costantino Durio paid for the new façade on the Basilica of the Sacro Monte, dedicated in 1906.

the attention of scholars outside Italy to their unique art.⁵⁶ At the same time, local historians led by Guido Gentile and Pier Giorgio Longo were dispelling the myths and misconceptions that clouded the history of Varallo and the Sacri Monti. They were among the pioneering scholars who took part in the first international conference on the Sacri Monti in 1980, giving rise to a series of initiatives that led eventually to the establishment of a centre for the study of the Sacri Monti in 2005.⁵⁷ Meanwhile historians like Pier Paolo Viazzo and Gianpaolo Garavaglia were examining the social and demographic development of Varallo and the Val Sesia, broadening the scope of a local historical tradition that had hitherto focused on the social and political elite.

Impelled by this growing scholarly interest, the regional authorities of Piedmont took steps to conserve the region's cultural heritage, its monuments, and its landscape. Areas of outstanding natural beauty and artistic value were identified and set aside as nature reserves.⁵⁸ In 1980 the sanctuary at Crea was the first of these areas to be designated as a nature reserve and a site of artistic importance by its local authorities. Similar initiatives involving the areas of other Sacri Monti, at Varallo, Orta, Ghiffa, Domodossola, Belmonte, and Oropa soon followed. This preservation campaign culminated in the recognition by UNESCO of nine of the Sacri Monti as World Heritage Sites in July 2003. Samuel Butler would have been delighted. This decision by the world body echoed and validated his championship of the cultural significance of Varallo and the other sanctuaries he had explored in his wanderings through the western Italian Alps a century earlier.

⁵⁶ Wittkower, 'Montagnes sacrées', p. 92.

⁵⁷ Stefani Perrone, '1980: il primo convegno internazionale sui Sacri Monti'. The Centro di documentazione sui Sacri Monti is located at Ponzano Monferrato, close to the Sacro Monte of Crea. Its publications include *Atlante dei Sacri Monti* and *Linee di integrazione e sviluppo all'atlante dei Sacri Monti, Calvari e complessi devozionali europei*.

⁵⁸ De Filippis, *Guida*, pp. 13–14; Loderi, 'I parchi dei Sacri Monti di Crea, Orta e Varallo' (written in 1980 when the parks were being created).



Figure 2.1. Map of the Val Sesia, c. 1690. Drawing attached to *Supplica di Primi conte Visconti Fassola di S. Maiolo*, Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, MS Carte 8659. Courtesy of Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Département de Reproduction.

THE VAL SESIA: SOCIETY AND POLITICS

Geography and History

The underlying argument of Samuel Butler's two books on the Sacri Monti was that their distinctive art was rooted in its social and cultural environment: the valleys of the Western Alps were the matrix that fostered it. This insistence on the importance of context set him apart from the other critics of his time, for whom art was the product of individual creative genius. He held that the art of the alpine valleys was an organic expression of its creators' values and way of life: it was an authentically popular art, unlike the art of metropolitan Europe that he condemned as sterile and decadent.

So if we are to assess his argument, we must examine how the Val Sesia — and by extension the other valleys of the Western Alps — evolved as a specific social, political, and cultural community that gave birth to its unique art. At first sight, the isolated, poverty-stricken Val Sesia seems an unlikely place to have produced a vibrant artistic culture. But appearances can be deceptive. From the later Middle Ages the valley nurtured a tradition of skilled craftsmanship and artistic creativity. Despite its isolation, it was receptive to external cultural influences, from Milan and the cities of Lombardy, and from north of the Alps. The skills honed by successive generations of artists and craftsmen from the Val Sesia created a demand for their services far from their homeland. Every spring saw an exodus of stonemasons, stucco-workers, painters, and builders to work in the Swiss Cantons, in Piedmont and Savoy, and as far afield as Rome. At the onset of winter they would return home, bringing the wages they had earned to sustain the families they had left behind on their annual migration. In the valley itself, merchants and professional men provided the patronage for

the craftsmen who constructed and decorated the churches in every local community and — most importantly — at the Sacro Monte of Varallo. This was the first of the alpine sanctuaries that Butler visited. It inspired him to undertake his extensive study of the alpine sanctuaries and led him to see their art as the work of local artists who expressed the aspirations of the people among whom they lived. The Sacro Monte of Varallo is the first and the greatest of all the Sacri Monti. It was established between 1486 and 1493. With the support of the notables who constituted Varallo's town council, or *vicinanza*, its founder, the Observant Franciscan Bernardino Caimi, designed it as a destination for pilgrims, a holy space for meditation and spiritual renewal modelled on the Holy City of Jerusalem. His choice was by no means fortuitous: apart from the spiritual motives that impelled him, potent geographical, political, and economic factors combined to determine that Varallo would become the site of his New Jerusalem.

Varallo is situated at the center of the Val Sesia, a narrow valley carved by the river Sesia as it winds precipitously southwards from its source on the flanks of the Monte Rosa (4637 m) to the flatlands of Lombardy above Novara. It is a small, compact territorial unit defined by the serpentine course of the river: the road from Alagna, its most northerly town, to Borgosesia, where the valley opens onto the Lombard plain, measures little more than fifty kilometres in length.¹ Varallo stands at the midpoint of this road, where the only bridge linking the upper and lower valleys crosses the Mastallone, the chief tributary of the Sesia. This location goes a long way towards explaining the pre-eminence Varallo always enjoyed in the Val Sesia as a market and administrative centre.² By the later Middle Ages the town's leading families had come to dominate the political and economic life of the valley, so it was no accident that Caimi chose Varallo as the site for his New Jerusalem: the town was the focus of the valley's political and cultural geography. Its leading families were more than willing to collaborate with him in an enterprise that besides its spiritual rewards would confer prestige on their community, affirm their ascendancy over the rest of the valley, and promise economic returns.

Geography defined the Val Sesia as a self-contained community, similar in certain respects to the Val d'Aosta or the Val d'Ossola, its neighbours to the west and the east. Unlike them, however, the Val Sesia was not a commercial axis because it is a cul-de-sac, with nothing but steep footpaths leading north

¹ Raviola, 'La Valsesia in età moderna tra frontiere e cartografia'.

² Debiaggi, 'Origine e sviluppo dell'urbanistica di Varallo Sesia'.

across the alpine watershed, and narrow outlets to the east (the Colma pass to Lake Orta) and the west (the pass of Crevacuore leading to the Val d'Aosta). The absence of transit traffic made the Val Sesia a self-reliant region. Its people depended for subsistence on their small arable plots and pastures, or *alpeggi*, and by the later Middle Ages, on the seasonal flow of migrant labour. Basic foodstuffs—grain, wine, salt—had to be imported. So the population was sparse, scattered in hamlets and isolated farmhouses along the valley floor or clinging to the lower slopes of its mountainous rim. A few small towns grew up along the course of the river—Alagna, Scopa and Campertogno in the north, Quarona in the center, Valduggia and Borgosesia to the south. But none of them compared in size and significance to Varallo.

The early history of the Val Sesia is obscure. There are traces of Roman settlements at the southern end of the valley, which constituted a *pagus* or rural district, and of a Celtic settlement where Varallo now stands.³ The upper reaches of the valley were uninhabited forest and pasturelands until the coming of the Walser, German-speaking immigrants from the Swiss Canton of Valais, in the later thirteenth century. The written historical record of the Val Sesia — the 'Valle Sicida' as it is named in the sources — supposedly begins in 882, when the Carolingian emperor Charles the Fat granted land around Romagnano at the southern end of the valley to the bishop of Vercelli. This grant was confirmed in 999 by the Holy Roman emperor Otto III, although the authenticity of both these charters has been questioned.⁴ In 1025 the emperor Conrad II transferred Varallo and parts of the Val Sesia to the bishops of Novara. From this point the bishops of Vercelli and Novara, and later the communal governments of the two cities, would compete for control of the valley.⁵ At the same time the counts of Pombia — feudatories with extensive lands in the plains north of Novara — and their descendants, the counts of Biandrate, were extending their authority over the valley and building castles at strategic points. Biandrate dominance was confirmed by an Imperial charter issued by Conrad III in 1140.⁶ The Church never established a strong economic or administrative presence there, perhaps because of the conflict between the bishops of Vercelli and Novara for jurisdiction. A monastery with extensive holdings in the plains of

³ Mor, 'La formazione territoriale del comune valesiano'.

⁴ Rizzi, *Storia della Valsesia*, p. 35.

⁵ Andenna, 'Dalla "curtis" al "burgus"'; Rondoni, 'I vescovi di Vercelli e la Valsesia'.

⁶ Provero, 'Ufficiali regi e poteri signorili'; Guglielmotti, 'Unità e divisione del territorio della Valsesia'; Rizzi, *Storia della Valsesia*, p. 55.

the Novarese, San Pietro di Castelletto, acquired lands in the Val Sesia and contributed to its early agricultural development.⁷

In the course of the thirteenth century a revolution took place that would shape the valley's history and set the parameters of its political life until the end of the Old Regime: the people of the Val Sesia threw off the domination of the counts of Biandrate and constituted themselves an autonomous community. Geographical isolation created the preconditions for autonomy. The valley was easily defensible, with access limited to a single entry-point, the bridge of San Quirico below Borgosesia. Upriver from there the valley constituted a single social and economic unit, with its population centers linked by a road paralleling the river. This facilitated both the movement of people and goods, and collective political action. But geography alone did not create autonomy: what transformed the Val Sesia into a self-governing community was the concerted action of its inhabitants, exploiting the advantages conferred by their geographical position and the divisions between their different rulers.

Their resistance to feudal domination began early in the thirteenth century and profited from the complex political rivalries then dividing the north-western Lombard plain. By now the power of the counts of Biandrate had been undercut by internecine conflict between the branches of the clan and by the rising military power of the communes of Novara and Vercelli. These two cities, in their turn, were locked in a struggle for dominance over the north-western Lombard plain and over the Val Sesia.⁸ The three-cornered fight between the two communes and the counts of Biandrate created the opening for the Valsesians to assert their independence. The process began in the early thirteenth century when local communities in the valley started organizing themselves as autonomous political entities, or *vicinanze*.⁹ These were composed of the original heads of households (*vicini*) in each locality, who chose leaders (*consuls*) to represent them; newer members of the community, or *forenses*, occupied a subordinate position.¹⁰ Common membership in a religious brotherhood may also have helped foster the political unity and communal sense of the *vicinanze*.¹¹

⁷ Guglielmotti, 'Unità e divisione del territorio della Valsesia', p. 129.

⁸ Cognasso, *Storia di Novara*, pp. 151–67.

⁹ Literally 'groups of neighbours or householders (*vicini*)' (singular: *vicinanza*).

¹⁰ Mor, 'La vicinia di Crevola Sesia', pp. 6–8. He calls the *vicinanze* 'the primordial form of the *universitas*'. On their development, see Mor, 'La formazione territoriale del comune valsese', and Guglielmotti, *Comunità e territorio*.

¹¹ On the role of confraternities in forming communities during a later period, see Torre,

In the middle of the thirteenth century the various local *vicinanze* coalesced into a federated community or *universitas* embracing the entire valley. The existence of this new entity is first attested in a pact regulating trade and the use of pasturelands concluded in 1270 with Ibletto de Challant, a leading noble of the Val d'Aosta. By this time Novara and its bishop had defeated Vercelli in the struggle to dominate the Val Sesia. In 1275 the commune of Novara, as overlord of the Val Sesia, recognized the *universitas*, now fully fledged and led by its elected consuls, as the governing body of the valley. In return the Valsesians acknowledged Novara as their suzerain and agreed to pay an annual tribute and appoint a citizen of Novara as their chief magistrate or *podestà*. Backed by Novara, the *universitas* steadily eroded the last vestiges of the Biandrate counts' seigniorial rule; by the end of the century the Biandrate castles in the Val Sesia had been demolished and the family's territorial holdings reduced to a few high pasturelands at the head of the valley.¹²

The *universitas* of the Val Sesia was divided into two separate bodies: the Curia Inferiore at the southern end of the valley, dominated by the towns of Borgosesia and Valduggia' and the northern Curia Superiore, centred on Varallo. The membership of the two curiae consisted of the consuls of the local *vicinanze* that comprised them. As the more populous part of the valley, the Curia Superiore was the dominant partner. Ultimate authority resided in the General Council (Consilium Generale Vallis Sicidae), composed of representatives from all the localities, which met twice a year at Varallo. The government of the Val Sesia was thus a pyramidal structure on three levels: the local *vicinanze* as the base, the councils of the two curiae in the middle, and the General Council at the top. These institutions would govern the valley until the Napoleonic era. The pattern of church organization roughly paralleled the binary division of the curiae: two vicars of the bishop of Novara administered the districts of Borgosesia and Varallo, while a third, at Scopa, oversaw the remote northern end of the valley.

From its inception the *universitas* would have possessed a set of statutes defining its powers and institutions, although the earliest redaction that has come down to us, the Statutes of the Curia Superiore, dates only from 1393.¹³ Supreme authority was vested in the General Council of the valley and its

Luoghi, pp. 31–61. Guglielmotti, *Comunità e territorio*, p. 195.

¹² Rizzi, *Storia della Valsesia*, pp. 93–98, 104–07, with genealogical table of the Biandrate, pp. 119–20.

¹³ *Statuti della Valsesia*, ed. by Mor, pp. 23–104.

elected leaders, the consuls, or as they came to be styled later, the regents. The *podestà* or prefect, residing at Varallo, dispensed justice, maintained public order, and held wide executive powers. To enforce his orders he relied on a permanent staff of six men, which he could augment when necessary with a posse of twenty-five men, 'prompti et experti' chosen by the consuls. The statutes laid down the procedures for electing the consuls, the *credenza* or inner circle of council members, and various subordinate officials; they also regulated agriculture, the management of pastures and the transfer of property, and stipulated the penalties for criminal offenses. In order to prevent any feudal lord from establishing suzerainty over the valley, the statutes forbade the building of fortresses. All males between the ages of eighteen and seventy were liable for military service to defend the valley and maintain order, but they were not required to serve beyond its borders. The statutes of other communities from this period — Crevola, Borgosesia, Quaronna — conform to this general type. They give us a glimpse of everyday life: the election of officials, property rights and inheritance laws, the management of pastures and livestock, the maintenance of ditches and bridges, the conservation of communal lands, and the punishment of crimes. Witchcraft was a particularly serious offence, for which the penalty was burning.

The elective offices listed in the statutes — the consuls, notary, fiscal officials, appraisers — were occupied by members of the leading local families. They were merchants and moneylenders, lawyers and notaries, and also landowners who invested the profits from their trade or professional activity in fields and farms. Better-off families in the smaller communities tended to migrate to Varallo and become part of the political and economic elite that resided there. Except in a few cases — the Scarognini, who were the paramount family in Varallo in the later Middle Ages, with family and financial connections extending into Lombardy — their influence did not reach beyond the confines of their valley. In comparison to the patrician elites of the Lombard cities, the wealth and power of these families were limited, because of the poverty of the valley they dominated. Some of them are discernible from early on and reappear generation after generation, like the Draghetti and Ravelli, who are recorded from the fourteenth century, or the Fassola, who dominated the tiny commune of Rassa in the north of the valley. Others achieved prominence later on, like the Alberganti, who rose to power in the seventeenth century and held sway over Varallo and the valley until the mid-eighteenth century. These families provided the patronage that sustained the artistic life of the valley.

The people of the Val Sesia were deeply attached to the right of self-government and the freedom from feudal dominion that they won in the thirteenth

century, and would maintain these rights under the succession of distant rulers who held sway over them, until the Napoleonic era. When the Visconti lords of Milan absorbed Novara in the later fourteenth century, they inherited that city's rights as suzerain of the valley. In 1395 Duke Giangaleazzo Visconti incorporated the valley into the Milanese state, but with the special status of a *terra separata* governed by its own laws and institutions. This arrangement was part of a policy the Visconti dukes were pursuing in their other alpine borderlands like the Val d'Ossola, to which they granted a similar degree of autonomy. In 1415 Duke Filippo Maria Visconti confirmed the statutes enshrining the Val Sesia's autonomy in return for an oath of fealty sworn by the representatives of the two curiae.

This agreement did not constitute a voluntary dedition to the Visconti by the sovereign people of the Val Sesia, as local patriots would later claim.¹⁴ It simply gave legal expression to Visconti suzerainty, replacing the earlier agreement between the Valsesians and Novara. The only change was that the *podestà* of the valley was now appointed by the dukes of Milan; in every other respect the valley retained its traditional rights of self-government. As before, the people of the Val Sesia were to pay a fixed annual tribute to their suzerain (less than they had paid to Novara), were free to import salt and foodstuffs without restriction, and were not required to perform military service outside the valley.

After Duke Filippo Maria, every successive ruler of the duchy of Milan — first the Sforza dukes, and then the Spanish Habsburgs — swore to uphold the valley's statutes, or privileges as they came to be called.¹⁵ So did Duke Victor Amadeus II of Savoy, when the Habsburgs ceded the Val Sesia to him in 1707. But after 1730 his successor Charles Emanuel III demurred, calling into question the legal basis of the autonomy the valley had enjoyed for almost half a millennium, and undercutting its hallowed institutions in a programme of bureaucratic centralization and enlightened reform. But he left the valley's privileges in place, at least nominally, and they remained the basis of the valley's legal status until the Napoleonic regime swept them away.

The Val Sesia's privileges conferred significant economic benefits on its inhabitants. In the seventeenth century a perceptive observer, the Valsesian notable Giovanni Battista Feliciano Fassola (1648–1713), maintained that

¹⁴ Rizzi, *Storia della Valsesia*, pp. 164–84, correcting the traditional view, e.g., in Tonetti, *Storia della Vallesesia*, p. 381.

¹⁵ See the renewals of privileges in Archivio di Stato di Milano (henceforth ASM), Feudi camerali, Comuni, 607.

there was a connection between the valley's privileges and the survival of its people, because the free trade in grain and wine guaranteed by the statutes made it easy for them to import the food their infertile land could not produce. They purchased it with the money earned by the seasonal migratory labour that formed the mainstay of their economy. Without the freedom of trade guaranteed by their privileges, Fassola claimed, the people of the Val Sesia would be forced to abandon their valley, or starve. He did not mention that the free import of salt for domestic use — a vital commodity not only for the valley's human inhabitants but for their livestock as well — conferred an indirect economic benefit. Smugglers re-exported some of the salt brought legally into the Val Sesia, trudging over the alpine pathways with their pack-animals to neighbouring regions like the Swiss Cantons where prices were higher. The smugglers also transported some of the grain and wine that the valley's inhabitants were allowed to import, and brought back goods for sale from north of the Alps.¹⁶ Their activities contributed to the flagrant disregard for the law that was deeply ingrained in Valsesian society.

Favoured by the mountainous terrain, smugglers, outlaws, and brigands abounded in the Val Sesia. We should not be misled by the aura of peace and serenity radiating from the Sacro Monte at Varallo: the Val Sesia was a turbulent, violent place. The population, organized in local militia companies for self-defence and accustomed to the use of weapons, was ready to rise, not only to repel an invader or oppose taxes imposed by a distant ruler but just as easily against the oppression of the ruling elite. The chronicle of events that has come down to us is punctuated by periodic uprisings: in 1518–19 the country people rose against the leading families of Varallo, invaded the town, and despoiled the Sacro Monte. In the later sixteenth century disgruntled citizens protested against misgovernment by the *podestà* and his officials, and against the elite families' monopoly of public offices, although this protest does not seem to have ended in violence.¹⁷ In 1601 the lesser communities protested

¹⁶ Fassola, *La Valle Sesia descritta*; Rastelli, 'Giovanni Battista Fassola conte di S. Maiolo', p. 446, n. 12, points out that the original manuscript is lost and that Tonetti's transcription is based on a defective version. On Fassola's career, see Torre, 'Fassola, Giovanni Battista Feliciano'; Tonetti, *Le famiglie valesiane*, pp. 1–48; Rizzi, *Storia della Valsesia*, pp. 237–38, 280–82.

¹⁷ 'Memoriale deli homini de Valsesia (1573)', 'Compendium Cause Vertentis Inter Forenses Montanos Superiores Vallis Sicidae & particulares nonnullos homines Varalli, qui se Vicinos nuncupari faciunt', and 'Substantia precum inter illos de Valle sicida Curiae superioris, qui forenses, & Montani nuncupantur, & illos qui vicini, & originarij antiqui oppidi Varalli appellantur' (c. 1600–1604?); ASM, Feudi camerali, Comuni, 84, no. 1.

when Marco Antonio Ravelli from Varallo was elected Sindaco of the valley. Next year the Senate of Milan ruled that a representative from Varallo and one from the lesser communities was to be elected to this office in alternate years.¹⁸ Whether this rule was actually observed remains uncertain. In 1678 people from the lesser communities — the ‘mountaineers’ — hard pressed by famine and furious at the chicaneries of Varallo’s elite, occupied the town, set fire to the houses of several wealthy families, then ransacked and burned the symbolic centres of political authority, the palace of the *podestà*, and the town hall.

But violence was not the sole prerogative of disfranchised peasants and poor townspeople. The valley’s dominant clans maintained bands of armed followers or *bravi*, settled their disputes by force of arms, and carried on vendettas that spanned generations. Their feuds could produce serious political repercussions. In the late seventeenth century, for example, conflict between the old-established Fassola and the rising Alberganti clans polarized the valley. This rivalry played its part in the events of 1678, which propelled Giovanni Battista Feliciano Fassola to the position of regent of the valley, for a brief moment. The Alberganti and their allies toppled him and drove him into exile, establishing their dominion over the valley for the next half century, until they were eclipsed in their turn by another clan.¹⁹

The Val Sesia’s location at the intersection of several borders — with the Swiss Cantons, the Val d’Aosta, the bishop of Novara’s enclave on Lake Orta, the Val d’Ossola, and the duchy of Milan — made it a refuge for bandits. Tracking and apprehending these malefactors in the isolated farmhouses and inns where they hid out was no easy task for the officials charged with keeping the peace. Several times in the later sixteenth century the *podestà* and the customs officers requested permission for themselves and their men to go armed with the latest type of arquebus, the wheel-lock, ‘not only by day but also by night’, to protect themselves against the bandits who they said were infesting the valley and threatening their lives.²⁰ The notoriously porous judicial system exacerbated the endemic lawlessness, for criminals, even murderers, could easily evade punishment through bribery or the influence of the powerful families that protected them, and then resume their activities.

¹⁸ Tonetti, *Le famiglie valesiane*, p. 180.

¹⁹ For the histories of the leading families, see Tonetti, *Le famiglie valesiane*.

²⁰ ‘Petition’ by Niccolo Torniello, 29 December 1574, and by the *podestà*, 1574, 1583, 1584, ASM, Feudi camerali, Comuni, 84 and 85.

Even the clergy engaged in criminal activities, both as accomplices or direct participants. In the early seventeenth century Carlo Bascapè, the reforming bishop of Novara, whose diocese included the Val Sesia, was plagued by lawless clerics who resisted his efforts to discipline them and scoffed at the spiritual sanctions he imposed on them. During the visitations he conducted through his diocese, he found that many parish priests, particularly in the remote mountainous regions, were indulging in carnal vice and concubinage, perpetrating robberies and other crimes of violence, making usurious loans to their parishioners, and even charging fees for their spiritual ministrations.²¹ In 1595 and 1596 he issued proclamations ordering his clergy not to attend plays, carry firearms, or harbor bandits in their homes.²² A particularly outrageous case was that of Bernardino Loisi, the parish priest of Zuccaro, who went about armed despite his clerical status and was implicated in a number of crimes, including a brutal murder in the Val Sesia. Despite the protection of a local nobleman, this clerical ruffian was finally brought to justice. In prison he refused to make his confession as Bascapè wished and was sentenced, unrepentant, to the galleys.²³

Among the worst of the clerical offenders identified by Bascapè were the Observant Franciscans of Varallo, the heirs to Bernardino Caimi, the founder of the Sacro Monte. Bascapè was appalled by their laxity in discharging their pastoral duties and their arrogant flouting of the laws of Church and state. He wanted the Sacro Monte to shine forth as a beacon of other-worldly serenity and hope in the precarious, dangerous world of the Val Sesia, on its sacred hill-top far above the fray. But in practice, because of the unseemly conduct of the Franciscan Brothers, the sanctuary failed to live up to his lofty intentions. In Bascapè's eyes, the Brothers had betrayed their sacred trust. He exhorted them to mend their lawless ways — in vain — until finally he expelled them from the sanctuary.

Economy and Society

Scanty natural resources imposed a limit on the Val Sesia's population: its steep rocky pastures and tiny arable plots could only support a small number of inhabitants. From the later Middle Ages the seasonal migration of craftsmen and labourers out of the valley provided the supplemental income that permit-

²¹ Chiesa, *Vita di Carlo Bascapè*, ed. by Pagano, p. 409.

²² Bascapè, *Scritti pubblicati*, pp. 584–92.

²³ Chiesa, *Vita di Carlo Bascapè*, ed. by Pagano, p. 512, n. 86.

ted modest demographic growth above what the inhospitable terrain could support, as Giovanni Battista Fassola observed. Drawing only on its meagre agricultural resources and the income from its migrants, the Val Sesia formed a self-contained demographic system that maintained its internal equilibrium over time, with an interval of slow growth in the sixteenth century. In 1609, Bishop Bascapè noted that the total number of parishes in the valley had risen from seven to thirty-seven over the previous century; as the population increased, new settlements had hived off from existing villages, creating new parishes.²⁴

The sixteenth-century increase in the Val Sesia's population represented the culmination of its recovery from the grave losses sustained during the epidemics of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. From observations made during his episcopal visitations Bascapè ascribed this demographic expansion to two principal factors: the diligence with which the people cultivated their little plots, vineyards, orchards, and chestnut plantations; and the money brought in by the migrant workers who departed each year in the spring and returned at the onset of winter. He observed that the migrants ranged from the unskilled — porters, street-sweepers, chimney-sweepers, and manual labourers, to those with a trade — ostlers and innkeepers, brokers and pedlars — and that the migrants from each village tended to specialize in a particular trade. The elite among them were the highly skilled craftsmen, the builders, masons, stucco-workers, and painters, who ranged far afield and returned to the valley with respectable profits.

Most migrants returned home for the winter; a few did not, and settled permanently in their new places of residence. The colonies of Valsesians living in Rome and Turin contributed to the financing of several chapels at the Sacro Monte of Varallo.²⁵ Giovanni Battista Miloda, a merchant from Sabbia in the Val Sesia long resident in Turin, became a naturalized citizen there in 1619; by then he held a high position in the financial administration of the local sovereign, Duke Charles Emanuel I of Savoy. Other members of his family, some from Varallo, also settled and prospered in Turin. An even more successful Valsesian clan that moved to Turin were the Carelli. Giuseppe Carello and his brothers loaned money to the government, for which they were rewarded with a patent of nobility in 1629. They acquired fiefs and advanced to high positions in the fiscal administration. Giuseppe's son Giacomo Antonio, a prosperous silk merchant, a high functionary in the fiscal bureaucracy, and a member of

²⁴ Bascapè, *Novara sacra*, trans. by Ravizza, p. 140.

²⁵ Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, p. 95, for Valsesians at Rome; pp. 121–22 for Valsesians at Turin.

Turin's city council, marked the apogee of the family's ascent. After his death in 1683 their fortunes declined.²⁶

Because of the money the migrant workers brought in, Bascapè said, the Valsesians lived better than the people in the plains, who were more exposed to the ravages of war and disease, and subject to the exactions of their lords. He noted that the churches in the mountainous areas 'were far superior to those in the plains, where the good lands are owned by nobles and rich lords, who often avoid spending money for the worship of God, and leave divine services to poor peasants or itinerant priests'. In the mountains, by contrast, there were no grasping lords, so that the inhabitants were prosperous enough to build and decorate their own churches, and properly support their parish priests.²⁷ A similar picture emerges from the reports compiled during the visitations of Bishop Balbis Bertone in the later eighteenth century. The men of each community specialized in a particular trade, and they were listed as 'absent' during the summer, while the women tended the flocks and fields.²⁸ Tramping through the alpine valleys in 1855, the reverend Samuel King and his wife arrived at Alagna in the late summer to find only women and children in the town: the men were all far away.²⁹ The annual exodus and return of craftsmen and labourers would continue until the onset of the Great Depression and the restrictions on emigration imposed by the fascist regime. This constant movement meant that the Val Sesia was never a closed community; interaction with the outside world through seasonal migration not only supplemented its exiguous agricultural resources but opened it to cultural influences from outside its narrow confines.

This pattern of seasonal migration was not unique to the Val Sesia; it was replicated in the other alpine valleys. The stonecutters of Lugano, perhaps the most esteemed of all these itinerant craftsmen, were numbered among the leading builders of churches and palaces in Rome in the seventeenth century. Like the Luganesi, some of the men from the Val Sesia travelled great distances to where their skills were in demand. There is a rough correlation between skill-levels and distances: unskilled migrants travelled relatively short distances to work as agricultural labourers in the plains around Vercelli and Novara, whereas skilled craftsmen covered impressive distances to reach their places of work.

²⁶ Rosso, 'I Miloda, i Carelli e gli altri'. These two families were divided into several branches whose relationships are difficult to disentangle.

²⁷ Bascapè, *Novara sacra*, trans. by Ravizza, pp. 141–42; cf. Tonella Regis, 'La Valsesia'.

²⁸ Papale, 'Le note sulla società valseseana'.

²⁹ King, *The Italian Valleys*, p. 366; cf. Viazzo, *Upland Communities*, pp. 33–42, 130–35.

Our best information about the seasonal migration of the skilled craftsmen comes from Alagna and the northern end of the Val Sesia. A particular family might produce a long line of skilled workers specializing in a single craft. Generations of masons belonging to the Bodmer family, a Walser clan based in Riva Valdobbia and Alagna, for example, worked in Zurich and other Swiss cities between the early sixteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries. Some remained there and became naturalized Swiss citizens.³⁰ Valsesian builders, stucco-artists, painters, and woodworkers played an important part in the wave of church building and decoration that swept the high valleys of Savoy, Faucigny, Tarentaise, and Haute-Maurienne in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.³¹ The availability of a pool of skilled craftsmen produced a feedback effect in the Val Sesia itself; there was always a supply of expert builders and decorators on hand to work on the Sacro Monte at Varallo or, from the later sixteenth century, at the new Sacri Monti being built at Orta and Oropa. The d'Enrico brothers from Alagna are an excellent example of a family of artists who travelled far afield to exercise their skills. They worked at Varallo, then at Orta and Oropa. The most famous of them, the painter Antonio, or Tanzio, spent years working in Rome and southern Italy before returning to Varallo to rejoin his brothers at the Sacro Monte.

The d'Enrico hailed from the Walser communities in the upper reaches of the valley. The Walser were Swiss colonists from the Valais who settled this area from the mid-thirteenth century.³² There were other Walser communities in the adjacent valleys, around Gressoney in the Val d'Aosta and Macugnaga in the Val d'Ossola. They maintained ties to their homeland north of the Alps and continued to speak its German dialect. Bascapè noted that the Walser in the Val Sesia formed a close-knit, largely endogamous community living apart from their Italian-speaking neighbours, and that — evidently because of their linguistic affinity — their seasonal migration gravitated to the Swiss Cantons and southern Germany. In 1581 the curate of Alagna reported that more than fifty skilled masons and stone-cutters left his parish each spring, mostly for German-speaking lands, and returned in November. They contributed to Alagna's ris-

³⁰ Debiaggi, *Dizionario degli artisti valesiani*, pp. 17–20, 43, 121–22, 140.

³¹ Robbe, *Les retables de bois sculpté en Tarentaise*; Oursel, *Art en Savoie*; Cerclet, Hudry, and Peyre, *Les chemins du baroque*; Bogey Rey, 'La présence des artistes et artisans valsésiens en Savoie'.

³² Rizzi, *Storia della Valsesia*, pp. 73–108, 161–64; Viazzo, *Upland Communities*, pp. 135–51; Viazzo, 'Il bilinguismo e il biculturalismo valesiano'.

ing prosperity, but the curate feared they would be exposed to the temptations of heresy in the Protestant lands to the north. To counter this threat, Bascapè banned the importation of prohibited books and ordered that emigrants must obtain licenses from their parish priests before departing, and submit proof on their return that they had lived ‘catholically’ while abroad.³³ In the view of this zealous prelate, migration posed an insidious threat to the spiritual welfare of his flock. Migration could have perilous consequences.

However, Giovanni Battista Fassola, writing later in the seventeenth century, saw migration as a positive factor conferring cultural benefits: the hard-working people of the Val Sesia,

who travel abroad in the world, return home well versed in the arts, with money, and sharp intelligence, which aids them in their crafts, commerce and money-making, and in war, or similar undertakings, so that the Valsesians are useful to many princes and republics by reason of these skills, which make up for the lack of craftsmen in the princes’ own states.³⁴

We should perhaps discount the tinge of local pride in this statement, but evidence lends some weight to Fassola’s contention that his compatriots were better educated and endowed with multiple skills because of their exposure to a wider world. Figures from the late eighteenth century — the earliest we have — suggest that rates of literacy were higher in the upland valleys than in the plains. Following Fassola’s argument, we could relate this divergence to the cultural openness and adaptability encouraged by migration, and to the pressure to acquire essential skills — like the ability to read and write or keep accounts — that it imposed.³⁵

Seasonal migration was underwritten by a network of credit. Few migrants possessed the means to support their families while they were away, so they depended on credit advanced in the springtime by wealthier citizens, to be repaid when they returned home at the beginning of winter. Credit traditionally operated in private, informal networks, beyond the reach of the judicial system. So in the eighteenth century when the Savoyard government ordered that all credit transactions must follow the procedures set out in the new law code, or *Constitutions*, promulgated in 1770, it met resistance. In 1772 a leading merchant of Varallo, Gaudenzio Draghetti, drafted a protest against

³³ ‘Editti’, 1596, in Bascapè, *Scritti pubblicati*, pp. 471–74.

³⁴ Fassola, *La Valle Sesia descritta*, IV, pt 7, p. 126.

³⁵ Viazzo, *Upland Communities*, p. 139.

the new law, arguing that registering credit transactions as the Constitutions required would have a negative effect on the system of migrant labour. The cumbersome legal procedures required by the new law would make it harder for migrant workers to obtain the credit they needed. He claimed (perhaps with undue optimism) that these requirements would destroy the 'trust' that had hitherto prevailed between the migrant workers and the merchants who advanced money to them. Even though Draghetti's arguments can be read as special pleading on behalf of the valley's merchants, who saw the new legal requirements as a victory for their professional rivals, the notaries, his insistence on the centrality of migrant labour to the Valsesian economy rings true.³⁶

Seasonal migration produced a specific demographic pattern. Figures for marriages and births in areas with significant migration, like the Walser communities in the upper Val Sesia, indicate that male migration conditioned the local demographic rhythms. Men would traditionally depart around Lent and return at the beginning of November. Marriages were celebrated in the winter, mainly in January and February, and births predictably tended to cluster in the period from September to December. Low fertility rates, due to the prolonged male absences, and high infant mortality, due in part to the harsh climate, combined to slow the overall rate of population growth. Seasonal migration was thus a critical factor in the self-regulating demographic regime that prevailed in the Val Sesia.

The absence of so many of the men during the summer months meant that farming was largely women's work, or rather the work of those who remained behind: the womenfolk, the elderly, the children. They toiled continuously, tilling their little plots of land and herding their few cows and sheep in the steep pastures. Of the total landed area in the valley, half was forest or barren crags, with about a quarter suitable for arable farming, and the rest composed of pastures, the *alpeggi*. The forests formed an essential element in the valley's agrarian system, especially for the poorer peasants who depended on the woodlands for firewood and charcoal, timber, and rough pasture. The chestnut tree, celebrated in a local proverb as the giver of food, warmth, and timber, was a vital crop, cultivated in plantations on the steep hillsides.³⁷ Arable land was located in the valley bottom, and, as Bishop Bascapè observed, the little orchards and fields there were cultivated with great care. In his protest against the Constitutions of 1770 Gaudenzio Draghetti pointed to another regulation that would adversely

³⁶ Torre, *Luoghi*, chap. 5.

³⁷ Torre, *Luoghi*, pp. 177–78; Rizzi, *Storia della Valsesia*, pp. 158–59.

affect the valley's agrarian economy. Most plots were tiny, and thus of little value, with the result that sales were conducted informally to minimize costs. The Constitutions' requirement that all transactions be conducted through the courts, he contended, would raise the cost of the transactions, add to their price, and paralyse the land market.³⁸

The small size of these plots was due not solely to the peasants' poverty but also to the functional need for a sequence of pastures distributed at intervals up the sides of the valley, ladder-fashion, to take advantage of the different climatic zones at different elevations. A family typically owned two or three cows and heifers, and a few sheep and goats, kept in stalls during the winter and put out to pasture in the lowest *alpeggi* as soon as the grass began to grow in the spring. As the weather warmed and the snow melted on the higher slopes, the animals would be moved there to feed on the newly sprouted grass. The vertical distribution of these little plots allowed the small workforce represented by a peasant family, minus its menfolk, to optimize its labor, moving animals upwards from plot to plot through the summer months, in a way that would not have been possible with a single large holding.³⁹ But the *alpeggi* could not support a family's cattle and sheep through the entire year. While they were kept in stalls during the winter the animals had to be fed on hay, which the family's meadows could only partially provide: the remainder had to be imported from the plains to the south. As Fassola argued in the mid-seventeenth century, the ancient privileges that guaranteed the Valsesians' freedom to import foodstuffs, including hay for their animals, were thus crucial for the valley's economic well-being. Without the earnings brought home by migrant workers, the people of the Val Sesia would not have been able to pay for any of the hay and food they had to import. Seasonal migration, farming adapted to the harsh environment, and the freedom to import the foodstuffs that the land could not provide worked together to sustain the population in a self-regulating demographic regime.

Varallo

The little town of Varallo was the political and economic hub of the Val Sesia, its biggest population centre, and the focal point of its cultural life. For Bernardino Caimi it was therefore the logical site for his New Jerusalem. In

³⁸ Torre, *Luoghi*, pp. 179–81.

³⁹ Viazso, *Upland Communities*, pp. 16–25.



Figure 2.2. View of Varallo by Johann Blasius Manauft. 1688.
Courtesy of the Direzione, Riserva Speciale del Sacro Monte di Varallo.

1486, with the support of Varallo's town council, he started to lay out the Sacro Monte on the hilltop above the town and build a monastery below it for the community of Observant Franciscans who would serve it. The foundation of the Sacro Monte would profoundly transform Varallo. It made the little town, remote and isolated in its mountainous cul-de-sac, a sacred place whose mystique attracted pilgrims from Lombardy, and soon from further afield. It both created a focus for the town's devotional life and stimulated its economy; the growth of the pilgrim traffic drawn by the Sacro Monte stimulated the growth of the inns and taverns catering to it.

The earliest mention we have of Varallo, in a charter of Conrad II in 1025, specifically notes the existence of its bridge over the Mastallone torrent. In 1417 the bridge was rebuilt in stone, and in 1863 it was widened to form the bridge that spans the Mastallone today.⁴⁰ By the early thirteenth century Varallo was

⁴⁰ Guglielmotti, 'Unità e divisione', p. 134; Pizzetta, 'Evoluzione di un centro storico', p. 49.

a place of some substance; a treaty between the people of the Val Sesia and Vercelli in 1217 lists a population of more than a thousand, distributed among 175 households in the town itself and its surrounding hamlets.⁴¹ The original nucleus of the town was on the right bank of the Mastallone, where the palazzo of the Scarognini-d'Adda family still stands. The area on the left bank grew up later around the shrine dedicated to San Gaudenzio, perched on a crag, which is first mentioned in 1322. The foundation of the Sacro Monte on the hilltop south of the Mastallone would confirm the shift of the town's centre of gravity to this zone. Varallo thus evolved as a bipolar formation on either side of the Mastallone, with the district on the southern bank eventually becoming the more populous sector and the seat of government. The hall where the *vicinanza* convened is first mentioned in 1300 — Varallo had declared itself a self-governing commune in 1218 — and the residence of the *podestà*, or Palazzo Pretorio, the most imposing building in the town, is mentioned about the same time.⁴² The charter of privileges granted to the Val Sesia by Duke Filippo Maria Visconti in 1415 stipulated that the General Council of the valley was to meet at Varallo, recognizing the town as the *de facto* capital, although its political dominance was never given precise legal definition.⁴³

Its location at the junction between the upper and lower segments of the Val Sesia made Varallo the natural focus for exchange. Markets were held there twice a week, and fairs four times a year.⁴⁴ But Varallo's isolation, together with the poverty and limited size of its hinterland, meant that it would never become a centre of commercial or industrial activity. The construction of the Sacro Monte gave a modest boost to the town's economy, but like the Val Sesia as a whole, its demographic growth was stagnant or laboriously slow. We have no figures for its population until 1594. These show 5448 inhabitants listed for the town and its (ill-defined) 'surroundings'; this figure rose to 7316 at the beginning of the eighteenth century, then dropped slightly to 7243 in the census of 1760–63. In 1774 the population of Varallo, without its satellite communities, stood at 3246, accounting for roughly one-tenth of the entire population of the Val Sesia.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Mor, 'La vicinia di Crevola Sesia', p. 9.

⁴² It was demolished in 1824: Pizzetta, *Varallo, le antiche contrade*, pp. 6–10.

⁴³ Mor 'La formazione territoriale del comune valesiano', p. 294; Debiaggi, 'Origine e sviluppo', pp. 149–52. The location of the principal public buildings is shown in the engraving of Varallo by Giovanni Blasio Manauft (1688). (See here Fig. 2. 2).

⁴⁴ Garavaglia, 'Potere politico e strategie familiari', p. 62.

⁴⁵ Viazzo, 'L'evoluzione della popolazione della Valsesia', pp. 122–27; Beloch, *Bevölke-*

By this time we begin to have some idea of the shape of the town's economy. The land survey (*catastro*) compiled about 1775 lists a number of small workshops and businesses, all in the older part of the town, where a canal diverted from the Mastallone provided abundant water and a source of power. According to this survey the town possessed two presses (*torchi*) and three mills, owned by the wealthy d'Adda family; two metal-working plants (*forni*); four tanneries; five dyeing-shops; and three plants for processing hemp, one of them also the property of the d'Adda.⁴⁶

This dual role as a focus of modest economic activity and the seat of local government, meant that Varallo was always a magnet for aspiring families from different localities up and down the Val Sesia. They gravitated there from their rural homes, established their residences, and intermarried with the families that constituted the town's elite. The modesty of their dwellings reflected their limited financial means. None of the leading families could pretend to noble status, apart from the Scarognini, the town's leading clan from the later fourteenth century, and the d'Adda, Milanese patricians who married into the Scarognini line in the sixteenth century. The Val Sesia's leading families are best described as notables. The upper stratum resided in Varallo and formed its *vicinanza*, while the lesser families headed the smaller rural communities. This modest local elite never evolved into a closed oligarchy, as in the cities of the Lombard plain. Families ascended and declined, flourished and then disappeared; the composition of the Valsesian elite was in constant flux.⁴⁷

These local notables formed the membership of the valley's governing body, the General Council. Gianpaolo Garavaglia has analysed the composition and workings of this institution, using the registers of its deliberations that survive from the years 1624–54 and 1675–1707. Its members were elected by the thirty-six village constituencies that made up the valley's two curiae, and it normally convened twice a year in the residence of the *podestà* at Varallo, on 2 January and 29 June. In times of crisis, meetings were more frequent, but during the plague years (1629–35) they were suspended. The lists of attendees reveal that the membership represented a broad range of families: 461 different names appear in the first register, 485 in the later one; 279 figure in both registers. Many of the persons listed appear just a few times or only once, indicating a continual turnover in the make-up of the council. The recurrence of certain names, however,

runsgeschichte Italiens, III, 235.

⁴⁶ Pizzetta, *Varallo vecchio*, p. 15.

⁴⁷ Garavaglia, 'Potere politico e strategie familiari', pp. 84–87, 100–12.

suggests the existence of a core group of members, drawn from the better-off, more influential families hailing from the five chief towns of the Val Sesia, with Varallo alone furnishing close to one-third of the total membership.⁴⁸

The elite of the Val Sesia, acting through the General Council, vigorously resisted any attempt by their distant suzerains to curtail the valley's privileges. Faced with demands for new taxes or military service beyond the confines of their valley, they energetically defended what they held to be the Val Sesia's ancient rights, citing the privileges granted in 1415, and invoked the valley's dire poverty as a defence against added fiscal burdens. If we look closely, however, it becomes clear that they were playing an astute double game, positioning themselves as the indispensable middlemen mediating between a remote ruler and a restive, recalcitrant populace. On the one hand, this stance enabled the chief families to mobilize popular support by posing as the stalwart defenders of the valley's 'liberties' against tyranny and fiscal exactions — a stance that local historians in the past, like Federico Tonetti, tended to take at face value. On the other hand, by presenting themselves to their suzerains as experienced administrators and the upholders of public order, they were able to fend off outside interference in the valley's affairs. In this way they maintained their ascendancy and furthered their own interests against threats from above and below. By blocking new taxes and demands for military service they won popularity, while at the same time ensuring that their slice of the fiscal pie produced by the valley's population would not be reduced by an increase in their suzerain's share.⁴⁹

The local elite dominated the valley's cultural and religious life. They were the patrons who founded and led the local devotional and charitable institutions, endowed chapels and oratories, and commissioned works of art for the churches in the places where they resided. By the early eighteenth century about twenty Marian sanctuaries were to be found in the towns and villages up and down the valley.⁵⁰ The families that comprised the *vicinanza* of Varallo contributed to the embellishment of the churches in the town—San Gaudenzio, San Giacomo, SS Antonio e Marta—and headed its charities and religious brotherhoods. These were the confraternity of Santa Marta and the company of the Santo Spirito, both already active in the fifteenth century, and the con-

⁴⁸ Garavaglia, 'Potere politico e strategie familiari', p. 106.

⁴⁹ Garavaglia, 'I Savoia e la Valsesia', p. 50.

⁵⁰ Cozzo, 'Culti e spazi sacri nella Valsesia', p. 253.

fraternity of the Santissima Trinità, founded in the mid-sixteenth century.⁵¹ So when Bernardino Caimi decided to found his New Jerusalem at Varallo, the *vicinanza* enthusiastically embraced his plan. It dovetailed with their traditions of religious patronage, while also conferring material and spiritual benefits on their town and on themselves. Their moral and financial support did not diminish with the passage of time. It would sustain the Sacro Monte for the next three centuries.

⁵¹ Longo, “Con gl’ochi et chon la mente”, pp. 33–34; Cagna, ‘La Confraternita della Santissima Trinità’. On the company of the Santo Spirito, see Torre, *Luoghi*, pp. 34–39, analysing Bishop Bascapè’s commentary on the peculiar nature of this charitable brotherhood.

THE FOUNDATION OF THE SACRO MONTE OF VARALLO

The Founder: Bernardino Caimi, the Observant Franciscan

The story of the Sacro Monte of Varallo begins with the Observant Franciscan friar Bernardino Caimi. He conceived the Sacro Monte as a replica of Jerusalem which would function as a 'substitute' for the Holy Places for pilgrims unable to make the journey to the Holy Land. In theological terms, a substitute, though spatially and temporally remote from its original, possessed the same miraculous power and numinous aura. Although visiting a substitute of the Holy Places was only a 'virtual' pilgrimage, it conferred the same spiritual rewards as an actual journey to the sites in Palestine.¹ Caimi's project was thus in line with orthodox Christian thinking, and was not an innovation. For centuries, replicas of the Holy Sepulchre had been built in different places in Europe for the benefit of those who could not go in person to the Holy Land.² But Caimi conceived his plan on a much grander scale. He intended to build not just a replica of the Holy Sepulchre but of all the Holy Places, as a substitute goal for pilgrims: a New Jerusalem in the Western Alps.

Caimi's inspiration sprang from two sources. The first was his desire to reproduce the Holy Places he had visited in Palestine a few years before, but in a purified, ideal form. He intended to construct a simulacrum of the Holy City as it would have been at the moment of Christ's Passion, pared down to its essen-

¹ On the medieval concept of substitution and virtual pilgrimage, see Nagel and Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, pp. 54–61.

² For example, at Cambrai and Piacenza: Ousterhout, 'Loca Sancta and the Architectural Responses to Pilgrimage', p. 118.

tials, purged of later accretions, and liberated from the hostile presence of its Muslim and Jewish inhabitants.³ In effect, he envisioned his New Jerusalem as a kind of devotional utopia, or in today's terms, as a Christian theme-park. The second source of inspiration was his intense personal piety, which he expressed in over one hundred sermons whose texts have come down to us.⁴ In them he strove to guide his hearers to a state of *compassio*, or participation in the sufferings of Christ, and then lead them to penitence and redemption. For greater effect, he depicted the scenes of the Passion realistically. In the Sacro Monte this message took on physical form. Pilgrims would be moved by contemplating representations of the key events in Christ's Passion, in simulacra of their topographical settings. Caimi's Sacro Monte, like his sermons, was designed to stimulate reflection on Christ's sacrifice, promoting the pilgrims' spiritual renewal and setting them on the path to salvation.⁵

Caimi's project for the Sacro Monte of Varallo enshrined the intense forms of spiritual and devotional life that he practised as a member of the Observant Franciscan order. The Observants had split off from the main body of the Franciscans in the later fourteenth century, seeking a more rigorous spiritual life in accordance with their own interpretation of the rule laid down by Saint Francis of Assisi. After they received papal recognition as a separate community within the Franciscan order in 1373, their membership steadily increased.⁶ Observant houses appeared in different parts of Italy, in small towns or in remote rural areas where the Brothers could dedicate themselves to an eremitical way of life, following the example of their founder, Paoluccio dei Trinci of Foligno, who had lived a life of intense prayer and penitence with a few companions in the mountains of Umbria at Brugliano. Observant communities soon began to appear in Spain, France, and Germany. The order's renown was greatly enhanced by the charismatic preaching of its most celebrated member, Bernardino of Siena (1380–1444, canonized 1450).⁷ In 1446

³ Wharton, *Selling Jerusalem*, pp. 118–34; Bresc-Bautier, 'Les imitations du Saint-Sépulchre de Jérusalem'. For the Muslim population's hostility to Christian pilgrims, see von Breydenbach, *Die Reise ins Heilige Land*, p. 18. On Breydenbach's text, the first illustrated account of the Holy Land, see Ross, *Picturing Experience*.

⁴ Piana, 'Il beato Bernardino Caimi'; Longo, 'Alle origini del Sacro Monte di Varallo', pp. 44–48.

⁵ Mulvaney, 'The Beholder as Witness', pp. 170–71, 187–88.

⁶ Nimmo, *Reform and Division in the Medieval Franciscan Order*, pp. 364–404; Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order*, pp. 369–83, 442–52.

⁷ Bernardino of Siena served as vicar general of the Observants from 1438 to 1442.

Pope Eugenius IV established the Observants as a new Franciscan order, and ten years later they received their own statutes from Calixtus III.

The Observants were renowned not only for their strict way of life and dynamic preaching, but also for their ministry to the poor and disfranchised. One of the ways in which they strove to improve the lot of the poorest strata of society was by shielding them from predatory moneylenders. Their campaign against usurers often inflected their preaching with a virulently anti-Semitic tone, for they regarded Jewish moneylenders and pawnbrokers, usually the sole source of credit for the poor, as predators.⁸ This perception led the Observants to pioneer the foundation of municipal pawnshops, or *monti di pietà*, in the cities of central and northern Italy as a Christian source of credit at minimal rates of interest. On occasion, their preaching whipped up ugly incidents of anti-Semitism, as in 1475 at Trento, where the Lenten sermons of Fra Bernardino da Feltre provoked a pogrom against the city's Jews.

In the later fifteenth century the Observants started to establish communities in northwest Italy, with the support of the local notables: at Pallanza on Lake Maggiore, at Vercelli, at Orta, and at the southern end of the Val Sesia, at Borgomanero and Romagnano Sesia.⁹ From these new foundations they conducted missions through the countryside, preaching on penitential themes and hearing confessions.¹⁰ Caimi himself was one of the members of his order deputed to seek out locations for new Observant houses. His project for the Sacro Monte at Varallo and its complementary foundation, the Observant monastery of Santa Maria delle Grazie, would be the most significant step in the expansion of his order in north-western Italy.

Bernardino Caimi was born into a noble Milanese family towards the middle of the fifteenth century.¹¹ The date when he entered the Observant Franciscan order is uncertain, but we know he was present in the Observant house of Sant'Angelo in Milan from 1467 to 1471, and that he held the position of *magister theologiae* there in March 1472. He is sometimes confused with his contemporary Bartolomeo Caimi (perhaps his brother), also an Observant Franciscan, and the author of a confessional manual. Both men were active

⁸ Wharton, *Selling Jerusalem*, pp. 120–26.

⁹ Bossi, 'La Valsesia e il francescanesimo', pp. 131–32; Longo, 'Fonti documentarie sui Francescani a Varallo', pp. 30–31.

¹⁰ Longo, 'Alle origini del Sacro Monte di Varallo', pp. 29–32.

¹¹ Morisi, 'Caimi, Bernardino, beato'; Galloni, *Uomini e fatti celebri*, pp. 65–85; Piana, 'Il beato Bernardino Caimi', pp. 303–07.

in the internal affairs of their order as heads of religious houses and chiefs of provinces. Caimi belonged to the rigorist wing of the Observants, which laid stress on contemplation and meditation on the holy ‘mysteries’, or the events of Christ’s life and Passion.¹² These mysteries would be represented in the chapels he planned to build on the Sacro Monte.

The crucial event that set Caimi on his course to found the Sacro Monte at Varallo came in 1477, when the Observant guardian of the Holy Places in Jerusalem died, and the order sent Caimi there as his temporary replacement. Since the mid-fourteenth century the Franciscans had been entrusted with the care of the Holy Places through an agreement with the Mamluk sultans of Egypt, whose domains at that time embraced Palestine and Syria. The Observant wing of the order was charged with this task in 1434. Once installed in their monastery close to the Holy Sepulchre, they had Jews banished from the immediate vicinity. Nearby they maintained a hospice for Christian pilgrims, who were also housed in their other monastery on the Mount of Olives.¹³ The Observants led the pilgrims on tours of the Holy Places in Jerusalem, and to Nazareth and Bethlehem, directing their devotions at each site and mediating their contacts with the Muslim population.¹⁴ In January 1478 Caimi left for Jerusalem to take up his post as temporary guardian of the Holy Places. He held it for a few months until a permanent guardian was elected to replace him, then he returned to Milan.

In the sermons he composed a few years later Caimi described the profound emotions that the Holy Places had stirred in him. The sermons gave detailed descriptions of his visits to each sacred site: the garden of Gethsemane; the residences of the High Priests and Pontius Pilate, where Christ was tried, tortured, and sentenced; Calvary and the Holy Sepulchre; the burial place of the Virgin and the site of Christ’s Ascension on the Mount of Olives. In the church

¹² ‘The term “Mystery” [...] was used to signify either the events of the life, Passion and death of Christ, or the places in which they were commemorated’: Gentile, ‘Imitazione dei luoghi ed evocazione dei “misteri”’, p. 21; cf. Longo, ‘Alle origini del Sacro Monte di Varallo’, pp. 44–50; Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, p. 26.

¹³ Nimmo, *Reform and Division*, p. 577; Panzanelli, ‘Pilgrimage in Hyperreality’, pp. 70–78; Wharton, *Selling Jerusalem*, p. 126; *Viaggio in Terrasanta di Santo Brasca*, ed. by Momigliano Lepschy, pp. 68, 185.

¹⁴ The pilgrim Felix Fabri complained that his visit to the Holy Places was conducted with unseemly haste and did not allow time for proper prayer and reflection at the sites. This determined him to make another pilgrimage a few years later. See *Les errances de Frère Félix*, ed. and trans. Meyers and Chareyron, p. 55.

of the Ascension, he recalled, there was a stone imprinted with the footprints reputedly left by Christ as he ascended to heaven: 'as I, miserable sinner, have seen with my own eyes and kissed many times, touching it with my face and hands. And I was tempted to place my feet in it, but I forbore, restrained by reverence'.¹⁵ He would reproduce the physicality of his experience of the Holy Places in the sites he would soon create on the Sacro Monte at Varallo. Caimi also described how he had travelled to Jericho and Galilee, climbed Mount Tabor, ventured as far as Tyre, Mount Lebanon, and Damascus, and even visited Saint Catherine's monastery in the Sinai desert on his way to Alexandria, where he departed on his homeward voyage. It has been suggested that Caimi made a second journey to Palestine in 1487–89, but this is unlikely. Nor would it have been of decisive importance, for by then he had already embarked on his project to build his New Jerusalem and had settled on Varallo as its site. His experience in the Holy Land in 1478, brief though it was, inspired him to build a replica of Jerusalem in his homeland, the duchy of Milan, so that his fellow countrymen could bear palpable witness to Christ's sufferings, as he himself had done in the Holy Land.

Pilgrimage to Jerusalem

As Caimi's experience attests, Jerusalem held a central place in the late medieval religious imaginary. His reverence for the city and its sacred sites was in line with his order's devotional practices.¹⁶ He and his fellow Observants extolled the redemptive value of the *sequela Christi*, of walking in Christ's footsteps and empathizing with his sufferings. Caimi's plan for the Sacro Monte as a replica of Jerusalem grew out of the same motives as his preaching, but with an important difference: he intended to create an environment which would evoke *compassio* through physical contact with the holy mysteries, and a 'theatre of memory' to stimulate the pilgrims' imaginations.¹⁷

It was once thought that Caimi's decision to found his New Jerusalem in the Western Alps was motivated by the mounting danger facing pilgrims after the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. This is incorrect.¹⁸

¹⁵ Piana, 'Il beato Bernardino Caimi da Milano', p. 334.

¹⁶ Rusconi, 'Gerusalemme nella predicazione popolare', pp. 242–47.

¹⁷ Panzanelli, 'Pilgrimage in Hyperreality', pp. 237–39.

¹⁸ For an example of the traditional view. Gillet, *Dans les montagnes sacrées*, pp. 75–76; corrected by Zardin, 'I Sacri Monti e la cultura religiosa e artistica dell'Italia moderna', p. 63.

The Holy Land was ruled at that time by the Mamluk sultans of Cairo, who tolerated the Christian pilgrim traffic and profited from it. Accounts by Felix Fabri, Santo Brasca, and an anonymous French author, who all made the pilgrimage in 1480, shortly after Caimi visited the Holy Land, demonstrate that pilgrimage was a perilous undertaking, as ever, but that its time-honoured routine continued uninterrupted. In Venice the pilgrims embarked on one of the galleys licensed to carry them to Palestine. These galleys normally followed a prescribed route along the Dalmatian coast to Corfu, then to Rhodes, Cyprus, and finally Jaffa. In 1480 the pilgrims were forced to make a detour to Candia in Crete to avoid Rhodes, which the Ottomans were besieging, but they reached their goal and returned safely in the autumn.¹⁹ Bernhard von Breydenbach, who made the journey a little later, in 1483, does not mention any danger from the Ottomans, even though awareness of the threat posed by their growing maritime power had dramatically increased after they sacked Otranto in 1480. Nonetheless, the routine of pilgrim voyages from Venice continued as before. For example: the Dutch artist Jan van Scorel made the journey in 1520 or 1521, recorded it in landscape sketches he made in Palestine, and, after he returned home, commemorated it in group portraits of his fellow members of the Jerusalem pilgrim-brotherhood of Haarlem.²⁰ Caimi's decision to found the Sacro Monte was not motivated, therefore, by a perceived need to provide an alternative to the traditional pilgrimage to Jerusalem, in response to the Ottoman advance, but by his desire to recreate Jerusalem in an idealized form, endowed with all the spiritual power of the original.

Ottoman expansion would eventually make pilgrimage to Jerusalem a far more dangerous undertaking. Palestine fell under Ottoman rule in 1517, when Sultan Selim I conquered the Mamluks and added their domains to his empire. The Ottoman conquest of Rhodes in 1522 caused a radical change in the pilgrimage route, by depriving the Venetian galleys of a key staging-post on their route to the Holy Land. Nevertheless, the traffic continued. Ignatius Loyola set sail from Venice in 1522, by-passing Rhodes, and arrived at Jaffa, just as Fabri, Brasca, and Breydenbach had done before him. He then made his way to Jerusalem, where he assiduously visited the Holy Places. Like Caimi, he was deeply moved by the imprint of Christ's ascending feet on the Mount of Olives,

¹⁹ Besides the accounts of Félix Fabri and Santo Brasca, *Le Voyage de la sainte cité de Hierusalem*, ed. by Schefer, recounts a similar experience.

²⁰ Faries, 'Jan van Scorel's Jerusalem Landscapes'; Woodall, 'Portraits of Jerusalem Pilgrims'.

which he visited twice. His journey home proved eventful, but the peril he faced was bad weather, not marauding Turkish warships.²¹

By now, however, the intensifying maritime war between the Ottoman empire and the Christian powers was closing the pilgrim route to all but the hardiest souls. We can perhaps date the end of the traditional form of pilgrimage to the 1530s, half a century after Caimi founded his New Jerusalem at Varallo. In 1534 Loyola, along with a group of companions he had gathered during his studies at the University of Paris, resolved to travel to the Holy Land, to preach the Gospel. This time, however, he did not make the journey: it had become too dangerous. Instead, he and his companions made the momentous decision to settle in Rome and dedicate themselves to the service of the pope as a new missionary order, which they named the Society of Jesus.²² The golden age of pilgrimage was over.²³ But by that time Caimi's New Jerusalem at Varallo was well established and was attracting a steady flow of pilgrims.

The Act of Foundation

After he returned from Palestine in 1478, Caimi could only work gradually towards the goal of building his New Jerusalem, because he was occupied with official duties in the Observant order. He held successive positions as vicar of the Franciscan province of Milan, and as guardian of Observant houses in different parts of Italy; he prospected new sites for Observant houses in Lombardy and Piedmont; he was deputed to preach the crusade against the Turks there in 1482; he was sent by the pope on a diplomatic mission to Spain in 1483, and on another mission to resolve a conflict among the Observants of Calabria. He also frequented the court of Milan, as a confidant of Ludovico Sforza of Milan, 'il Moro', and spiritual adviser to his consort, Beatrice d'Este; this political connection must have aided him in making the plan for his New Jerusalem a reality.²⁴ Ludovico il Moro, at that time regent of Milan for his young nephew Duke Gian Galeazzo Sforza (whom he would succeed as ruler in 1495), would have welcomed Caimi's initiative as a convenient way to extend his influence over

²¹ Ignatius of Loyola, *The Autobiography*, ed. by Olin, pp. 48–54.

²² Ignatius of Loyola, *The Autobiography*, ed. by Olin, p. 87.

²³ Julia, 'Pour une géographie du pèlerinage'; Gomez-Giraud, *Le crépuscule du grand voyage*, chap. 4; Longo, *Memorie di Gerusalemme*, and Longo, *Vincenzo Favi*.

²⁴ Longo, 'Fonti documentarie sui Francescani a Varallo', pp. 30–31, 57–61.

the *terra separata* of the Val Sesia, secure its frontiers, and enlist the Observants to pacify its factional conflicts.

At some point amid his many missions and administrative duties Caimi decided on Varallo as the site for his New Jerusalem. The hilltop had long been a focus of popular devotion, and may have been a Celtic shrine.²⁵ Accounts of how Caimi chose this site verge on the mythic. According to one version, after visiting a number of places in the alpine foothills, he came to Varallo and chose it to be the site of the Sacro Monte after learning that a group of shepherds had heard an angelic choir singing nearby; another account relates that he was charmed by the sweet sound of birdsong in the trees crowning the hill. These portents revealed a divine presence on the hilltop. More concretely, to his eyes the hillocks and outcrops mimicked the sites in the Holy City, and the Mastallone torrent running below the hill stood in for the brook Cedron. In this topographically similar landscape Caimi set out to define and delineate his New Jerusalem, bringing forth the holiness hitherto latent in the place.²⁶

Ultimately, Caimi's choice was determined by his success in securing the support of the *vicinanza* of Varallo, and its leading citizen, Milano Scarognini. He welcomed Caimi's proposal and gave it his unwavering support. Scarognini and the city fathers of Varallo became active partners with Caimi in the foundation of the Sacro Monte. Without the support of Varallo's elite, the Sacro Monte would never have taken shape, or grown and prospered. For Scarognini and his colleagues, Caimi's vision offered tangible benefits. By making Varallo a sacred site, the project would add a religious dimension to the supremacy its urban elite enjoyed and strengthen their influence in the valley's turbulent politics. The Sacro Monte would also strengthen civic loyalties, forming the focus of a civic religion that would glorify the town and unite its citizens under the leadership of the *vicinanza*. And as the Sacro Monte's fame spread, so would the reputation of Varallo as a place marked by divine favour. So the town's notables, led by Scarognini, gladly embraced Caimi's project.²⁷

Having secured the backing of Scarognini and the *vicinanza*, Caimi obtained papal approval for his project. On 21 December 1486 Innocent VIII issued a brief authorizing him to accept donations from the people of the Val

²⁵ Fassola, *La Nuova Gierusalemme*, p. 7; Debiaggi, 'Premessa allo studio sulla configurazione urbanistica di Varallo', p. 37.

²⁶ Longo, 'Il monte e l'itinerario nel Sacro', p. 58.

²⁷ On the fraught relationship between the *vicinanza* and the Observant Brothers, see Symcox, 'La Vicinanza di Varallo e il Sacro Monte'.

Sesia on behalf of his order (its rule barred individual members from owning property). Caimi's project consisted of two parts: the Sacro Monte itself, to be built on the hill above the town, and the monastery of Santa Maria delle Grazie at the foot of the hill, where the Observant Brothers who served the sanctuary would live. Construction of the monastery would have started soon after the publication of Innocent VIII's brief, for by the time the building was handed over to Caimi and the Observants in 1493, it was virtually complete. Work on the Sacro Monte began a little later. The replica of the Holy Sepulchre was the first building constructed on the hilltop. It was finished by 1491, and by the time Caimi took possession of the sanctuary two years later, three more buildings had been erected there.²⁸ Thus began a long-drawn process of artistic production, interspersed with periods of inactivity, which would stretch over more than two centuries and create the complex of chapels that form the Sacro Monte that we see today.

Patronage: The Scarognini Family

The crucial role that Milano Scarognini, 'il Magnifico', played in bringing Caimi's enterprise to fruition is attested by the inscription honouring the two men above the doorway to the Holy Sepulchre on the Sacro Monte:

MAGNIFICVS DNS MILANVS
 SCARROGNINVS HOC SEPLCHR.
 CV' FABRICA SIBI CONTIGVA
 CHRISTO POSVIT. MCCCCLXXXXI
 DIE SEPTIMO OCTOBRIS /: R P
 FRATER BERNARDINVS CAIM'
 DE MLO. OR. MI'. DE OBS.
 SACRA HVI' MOTIS EXCO
 GITAVIT LOCA. VT HIC HIRLM
 VIDEAT QUI PAGRARE NEQVIT

(The Magnificent Lord Milano Scarognini founded this Sepulchre for Christ with its adjacent building in 1491 on the seventh day of October. The Reverend Father Brother Bernardino Caimi of Milan, of the Observant Order of Minorites, devised the holy places of this mountain so that he who cannot travel to Jerusalem may see it here.)

²⁸ Bossi, 'La data di fondazione del Sacro Monte di Varallo', pp. 72–80.



Figure 3.1. Inscription above the Entrance to the Chapel of the Holy Sepulchre, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Photo by the author, courtesy of the Ente di Gestione dei Sacri Monti, Varallo.

Caimi's connection to the Scarognini family dates back at least to 1482. When he was preaching the crusade at Casale Monferrato he may have met Milano Scarognini's uncle Marco, a high official at the court of Marquis Boniface IV of Monferrato, who bore the title of 'Seneschal of Monferrato'.²⁹ The Scarognini owned numerous properties in the Val Sesia, including a gold mine near Alagna; they were also merchants and financiers who advanced money to several of the ruling houses in Lombardy, including the Gonzaga of Mantua and the Paleologo of Monferrato. Milano made loans both to King Louis XII of France, after he conquered Milan, and to his rival, Duke Massimiliano Sforza. Since at least the early fifteenth century the Scarognini family had owned a palace in the older part of Varallo facing onto the Mastallone, where they entertained visiting dignitaries. At the time that Caimi founded the Sacro Monte, Milano Scarognini held the office of deputy to the *podestà* of the Val Sesia. In the summer of 1495 Duke Ludovico il Moro ordered him to muster the valley's fighting men to counter a possible incursion by the French army, retreating home after its short-lived conquest of Naples the year before.³⁰

²⁹ Panzanelli, 'Pilgrimage in Hyperreality', pp. 116–17.

³⁰ Longo, 'Fonti documentarie sui Francescani a Varallo', p. 66.

Milano Scarognini apparently underwrote much or all of the cost of the first buildings on the Sacro Monte and acted as director of the work there until his death in 1517, upholding a family tradition of religious patronage going back well over a century. In 1361 one of his ancestors, also called Milano, gifted '14 pieces of land' to endow two chapels in Varallo, to be served by a chaplain; in 1439 another ancestor, Antonio, endowed an oratory dedicated to Saint John the Baptist. In 1487 the family obtained permission from the bishop of Novara to consolidate these three endowments, which were to be served in rotation by a single priest. In 1486 they endowed a chapel dedicated to the Immaculate Conception, which was subsequently incorporated into the Observants' monastery church of Santa Maria delle Grazie.³¹

Milano Scarognini's patronage of the Sacro Monte and the Observant order was evidently a continuation of his family's tradition, but he may well have had more personal motives. Sins probably weighed on his conscience. He would have amassed his fortune in questionable ways, and his activity as a money-lender contravened the Church's prescriptions against the taking of interest. Such concerns would have helped motivate his partnership with Brother Caimi and his generous patronage of the Sacro Monte.

Milano Scarognini's will, drawn up in 1515, two years before his death, is redolent of his piety and his sense of lineage.³² It demonstrates the Scarognini's connections by marriage to other prominent families, not only in the Val Sesia but across the subalpine region. The document opens with a list of bequests to various clerics and religious bodies, and then stipulates the arrangements for Milano's funeral and exequies: a total of 189 paupers from Varallo and the surrounding communities, robed for the occasion and carrying torches and candles, were to accompany his cortège. The will then enumerates the masses to be celebrated for himself, his father, and his ancestors. Next, it details the disposition of his numerous properties in a *fedecompresso*, or entail, designed to preserve the family patrimony intact for future generations. Milano designates his male descendants as universal heirs, each to receive an equal share of his properties; his widow and married female relatives are to receive financial portions, the unmarried females to receive dowries. The will even stipulates that one of the heirs must continue to reside in the family palace at Varallo in order

³¹ Longo, 'Alle origini del Sacro Monte di Varallo', pp. 32–33. Marco Scarognini was buried in this chapel.

³² The will is in Longo, 'Fonti documentarie sui Francescane a Varallo', Appendix II; cf. Longo, "Hi loco visitando", p. 118.

to maintain it as the ‘ancestral’ family seat. If all the male heirs die, the inheritance is to pass to the female line.

This eventuality transpired when Milano’s grandson, Giovanni Antonio, the sole surviving male heir, died in 1565, leaving the family patrimony to his only daughter, Francesca. Through her the Scarognini fortune passed to her husband, the Milanese patrician Giacomo d’Adda, who amalgamated it with his own vast wealth. He maintained the Scarognini family’s traditional patronage of the Sacro Monte. He and his wife were also generous benefactors to the town of Varallo. In 1556 they endowed the hospital recently founded at Varallo by the priest Giuseppe Maio, together with a confraternity to administer it. In 1573 they established a seminary for poor boys from the Val Sesia, located in the grounds of their palace.³³

Caimi Takes Possession of the Sacro Monte

From 1486 construction proceeded on the monastery of Santa Maria delle Grazie and the Sacro Monte. In addition to the money contributed by Milano Scarognini, the funds for the work would have come from the collections authorized by Innocent VIII’s brief, but there were other sources too. In June 1489 Ludovico il Moro ordered that the money obtained fraudulently by an itinerant friar, and recently confiscated, was to be used to support ‘the building of the monastery of the Brothers Minor that has been started in the valley’, indicating that the construction of Santa Maria delle Grazie was under way.³⁴ Work on the Sacro Monte began with the construction of a ramp up the side of the hill to convey building materials to the summit; this would later serve as the route the pilgrims would ascend. In October 1491, Caimi and Milano Scarognini participated in the consecration of what would have been the first chapel built on the Sacro Monte, the Holy Sepulchre, commemorated in the inscription above the door. It was the nucleus of his project to reproduce the Holy Places.³⁵

³³ ‘Atti di Fondazione e Dotazione’ (copies), 21 September 1573, Archivio di Stato di Varallo (henceforth ASV), Seminario dei poveri fanciulli di San Giovanni Battista di Varallo, mazzo (henceforth m.). 1; cf. Cagna, ‘La Confraternita della Santissima Trinità’, pp. 200–13.

³⁴ Longo, ‘Fonti documentarie sui Francescani a Varallo’, p. 86.

³⁵ Debiaggi, ‘La cappella “subtus crucem”’, pp. 77–80, identifies the chapel ‘subtus crucem’ as the chapel of the Stripping of Christ, founded by Caimi and later repurposed; the chapel of the Ascension had also disappeared by the later sixteenth century: Debiaggi, ‘Le cappelle dell’Ascensione’, p. 57.

Caimi's original plan for the buildings on the Sacro Monte is difficult to decipher because of the changes that the site underwent in subsequent centuries: construction and reconstruction, demolition and addition, restoration and repurposing went on into the nineteenth century. But some idea of the original outline of the sanctuary can be deduced from the title-deed by which the *vicinanza* of Varallo ceded it to him on 14 April 1493.³⁶

This document records the ceremony in the town hall of Varallo, conducted before the people of the town, formally transferring the monastery of Santa Maria delle Grazie and the Sacro Monte to Caimi, in his capacity as vicar general of the Observant Franciscans of the Province of Milan. Milano Scarognini presided over the assembly in his capacity as deputy to the *podestà*, flanked by the two syndics of Varallo: his brother Francesco and Francesco Draghetti. The 'fathers of families' of Varallo gathered in the hall witnessed and ratified the transfer of the property. Their names make up a lengthy list, representing more than three-quarters of the town's households, the majority required for approving the transfer. (Another version of the document states that they comprised two-thirds of the total.) The document states that the donation to Caimi was made in accordance with the papal brief of 1486, and then it specifies the two properties being transferred to him and his order. One was the monastery of Santa Maria delle Grazie with its bell and bell-tower, buildings, workshops, gardens, and dependencies. The other was the group of buildings comprising the Sacro Monte: the Holy Sepulchre, the hermitage (*eremitorio del Santo Sepolcro*) adjacent to it, and two other chapels. One was dedicated to the Ascension and the other was described simply as 'subtus crucem', presumably because it was not yet finished and dedicated.

The document relates how Caimi was installed in the two properties through a ritual act of *possessio* recalling a ceremony of feudal investiture. The two syndics first accompanied him through all the rooms of the monastery in a formal perambulation and handed him the key. Next they presented him with pieces of the stone from which the monastery was constructed, together with a handful of soil, and some plants and branches from the monastery garden, which

³⁶ Longo, 'Fonti documentarie sui Francescani a Varallo', Appendix IV. The original deed is lost, but three versions survive: A, from the late sixteenth century, originally owned by the Alberganti family; B, a printed variant of A, from 1641, published in Galloni, *Sacro Monte di Varallo*, pp. 4–26; and C, another version of B now held by the Oblati del Sacro Monte. The three versions, which differ in detail, are products of the recurring disputes between the Observant Franciscans and the *vicinanza*. Version A includes a clause (evidently interpolated) enjoining the *vicinanza* not to vex the Brothers with lawsuits.



Figure 3.2. Façade of the Chapel of the Holy Sepulchre, Sacro Monte of Varallo.
Photo by the author, courtesy of the Ente di Gestione dei Sacri Monti, Varallo.

they deposited in his lap — ‘in gremium ipsius’ — to symbolize the transfer. The same ritual was re-enacted in the Sacro Monte on the hill above. The syndics escorted Caimi around the chapels, the hermitage, and the garden, handed him the keys, and deposited the same symbolic elements — soil, stones, branches, and plants — in his lap.

In a clause of critical importance for the future, the city fathers of Varallo — we should remember that some of them were lawyers or notaries — took care to specify that they were ceding the two sites to the Observant order alone, and to no other: the grant was not transferable. The deed further stipulated that they were only granting *possession* of the two sites to the Observants, while reserving the right of *ownership* to themselves, in perpetuity. The grant was thus conditional: the Observant Brothers were merely tenants of the two properties. As the legal owner of the Sacro Monte, the *vicinanza* retained the right to evict

the Brothers and transfer possession to another order, as it saw fit. This proviso ensured that the *vicinanza* retained control over the Sacro Monte. It made possible the expulsion of the Observants in 1603 by the bishop of Novara, acting in conjunction with the *vicinanza*, for their grave misbehaviour.

Caimi's Project

From the cursory description of the buildings in the deed of transfer, and with the aid of other documentation, we can form an idea of the original layout of the chapels on the Sacro Monte (see Appendix 1).³⁷ He divided the hilltop into separate topographical zones that he designated as the city of Jerusalem, Mount Zion, Gethsemane, the Mount of Olives, and the Valley of Jehoshaphat, plus Bethlehem and Nazareth.³⁸ The focal point of the complex was the chapel of the Holy Sepulchre. Designed as a replica of the Edicule enclosing the Sepulchre inside the Basilica at Jerusalem, this chapel still retains much of its original form.

On the left of the chapel's doorway Caimi's skull reposes in a niche; it was placed there early in the sixteenth century. To the right of the doorway, another niche encloses a piece of stone, with an inscription proclaiming that it is a fragment of the Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Beside it in another niche stands a statue of Caimi holding a model of the Sacro Monte, by the Valsesian sculptor Giovanni d'Enrico. Close by stands a stone slab, incorrectly described in an inscription as being similar to the stone that sealed Christ's tomb.³⁹ Further to the right of the Sepulchre the hermitage mentioned in the document of 1493 originally stood. It was demolished in the early eighteenth century and replaced by the baroque oratory that now occupies the site.

The interior of the Sepulchre chapel consists of a circular vestibule leading to a rectangular inner chamber containing the tomb itself, mimicking the Edicule in the Basilica in Jerusalem. A statue of Mary Magdalene, made of a wooden armature robed in gessoed cloth, with sculpted hands and head, stands guard at the entrance to the inner cell containing the tomb. The tomb itself is con-

³⁷ Debiaggi, 'Le cappelle dell'Ascensione'.

³⁸ Gentile, 'Imitazione dei luoghi', pp. 23–38, describes Caimi's plan, following Debiaggi's reconstruction in 'Sacro Monte di Varallo'.

³⁹ Debiaggi, 'La preistoria del Sacro Monte di Varallo', shows that it could not resemble the stone from Christ's tomb, which was round, and suggests that it may be a prehistoric stele. On its complicated history, see also Bober, 'Storia e storiografia del Sacro Monte di Varallo'.



Figure 3.3.
Entrance to the Tomb in the
Chapel of the Holy Sepulchre,
Sacro Monte of Varallo. Photo by
the author, courtesy of the Ente di
Gestione dei Sacri Monti, Varallo.

structed to the exact proportions of the original in Jerusalem; its low entrance compels pilgrims to bow as they enter, and an inscription on the lintel, datable to the time of its construction, attests to its authenticity: ‘Simile e. il. Santo. Sepolcro. de Yesu, Xristo’ (This is the same as the Sepulchre of Jesus Christ).

Inside, a full-size wooden figure of the dead Christ, dating from the time the tomb was built, lies recumbent on a stone bench running along one side. The recent restoration revealed that its arms were originally removable; substitution of a second set (now lost) would have allowed it to represent the crucified Christ, to serve perhaps as a processional figure during Holy Week.

On the hilltop west of the Sepulchre are the two areas Caimi named Gethsemane and the Mount of Olives, because of their resemblance to the sites in Jerusalem. On the Mount of Olives he placed a chapel dedicated to the Ascension; inside it he placed a replica of the original stone bearing Christ’s footprints. This chapel was moved to a different site in the later sixteenth cen-



Figure 3.4. Figure of the Dead Christ in the Chapel of the Holy Sepulchre, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Photo by the author, courtesy of the Ente di Gestione dei Sacri Monti, Varallo.

ture.⁴⁰ East of the Sepulchre was an outcrop of rock, which Caimi designated as Calvary. There he erected a tall cross, fashioned in part from pieces of wood he had brought from Jerusalem, which he had placed for a canonical forty hours in the hole in the rock of Golgotha believed to have held the base of the cross at the Crucifixion.⁴¹ The cross bore a wooden figure of Christ. Soon after Caimi's death a chapel representing the Crucifixion was built on the rock, which was replaced a few years later by the present chapel, designed by Gaudenzio Ferrari. Close to it stood a chapel originally dedicated to the Anointment of the Dead Christ, containing figures of the Virgin and her attendants mourning over the body of Christ on the so-called *pietra dell'unzione* (anointment stone).⁴² By 1514 this chapel had been repurposed to represent the Stripping of Christ, in which his naked figure was led by an executioner to the place of Crucifixion. From this chapel a flight of eighteen steps — as in the Basilica in Jerusalem — led up to the Crucifixion chapel.

To the east of this chapel, on the highest point of the hill, was a hillock that Caimi named Mount Zion, where the pilgrim hostel now stands. Here he had three chapels constructed: the Last Supper; the Descent of the Holy Spirit, which was never completed; and the Assumption of the Virgin. This latter chapel contained a robed, recumbent figure of the Virgin, surrounded by the

⁴⁰ It was replaced by the chapel of the Transfiguration in 1570–72.

⁴¹ Debiaggi, 'Sacro Monte di Varallo', pp. 246–52.

⁴² The figures are attributed to the brothers Pietro and Ambrogio de' Donati of Milan, and are dated to the mid-1490s. They are now in the Varallo municipal art gallery.

apostles (probably represented by frescoes).⁴³ In the seventeenth century the figure of the Virgin would be moved from this chapel to a new basilica specially built to house it. Next to the Assumption chapel a small hospice was built for the little group of Observant Brothers who officiated at the sanctuary; close by was the chapel of the Last Supper, with figures of Christ and the disciples seated at a table. Like the other figures from this early period, they are made of wooden frames covered by robes of gessoed cloth, with sculpted heads and hands. These figures were transferred to their present site in 1776. The fabric of this chapel was incorporated into a new building for conducting the Spiritual Exercises (today the pilgrim hostel).

On the western side of the hill, below the Holy Sepulchre in a zone he named the Valley of Jehosaphat, Caimi constructed a replica of the Virgin's tomb, which may originally have contained a recumbent statue.⁴⁴ It is a small rectangular structure with a pitched roof of split stone, a typical example of Valsesian vernacular architecture. Like the tomb in the Sepulchre, it conforms to the dimensions of the original in Jerusalem. (Today it is cut off from the other buildings on the Sacro Monte by the cableway terminal constructed in 1939.) Near to it Caimi placed the tomb of Joachim and Anna, the Virgin's parents; this was demolished when the cableway was constructed and its statues were moved to Varallo's municipal art gallery.⁴⁵

On the opposite side of the hill, lower down, Caimi designated two areas as Nazareth and Bethlehem. In the area called Nazareth a grotto dedicated to the Annunciation was constructed, closely resembling the original. It was later replaced by the present chapel, which replicates the place where the event supposedly took place, the Virgin's home: it is constructed as a copy of the Santa Casa of Loreto. Higher up, in the area he named Bethlehem, Caimi placed another grotto — later transformed into a chapel — representing the Nativity. It was soon joined by a cluster of other chapels depicting the Adoration of the Shepherds, the Magi, and the Circumcision, or the Presentation in the Temple.⁴⁶

⁴³ Gentile, 'Imitazione dei luoghi', p. 26, points out that the chapel housed two separate but related 'Mysteries': the Dormition of the Virgin and the Assumption.

⁴⁴ Longo, 'Alle origini del Sacro Monte di Varallo', p. 65.

⁴⁵ See the letter by Avv. Giuseppe Zanola, 15 September 1939; ASV, Società di conservazione delle opere d'arte e dei monumenti in Valsesia, m. 15; cf. Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, pp. 270–72.

⁴⁶ Debiaggi, 'La primitiva cappella dell'Annunciazione', pp. 174–78. Its resemblance to the Santa Casa has been obscured by subsequent alterations: Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, pp. 61–65, 70.

The presence of statues in some of the chapels at this early date demonstrates that Caimi did not simply intend to reproduce the sites of the Holy Land with topographical exactitude, but to people some of them with realistic figures, to appeal directly to the emotions of the onlookers and make them witnesses to the holy mysteries.⁴⁷ The use of figures followed a tradition going back to Saint Francis's creation of the first Nativity tableau at Greccio, and to the mode of Franciscan preaching using visual aids, whose most famous exponent was Bernardino of Siena. The pioneering work of Virginia Galante Garrone suggested that these tableaux of figures were connected to the mystery plays or *sacre rappresentazioni* of the later Middle Ages, an argument that has been contested by subsequent scholarship.⁴⁸

Caimi's figures could also be connected to the effigies displayed in churches at this time — for instance in the Santissima Annunziata in Florence — or to the Bewailing figures modelled by Niccolo dell'Arca in Bologna, or Guido Mazzoni in Ferrara and Naples. The similarities suggest that the figures at Varallo 'are in direct descent from those of Mazzoni' and the artists working in terra-cotta in northern Italy at that time.⁴⁹ At Varallo, the use of modelled, painted terracotta figures soon became the norm. Beginning with the work of Gaudenzio Ferrari in the early sixteenth century, they came to occupy centre stage at the Sacro Monte, as its didactic and devotional strategies shifted from Caimi's topographical imitation of the Holy Places — topomimesis — to a narrative conveyed by physical representations.

Through the 1490s work on the Sacro Monte went ahead under Caimi's guiding hand, so much so that the citizens of Varallo considered his presence indispensable. When they learned in April 1495 that the Observant order intended to send him to another province, they petitioned Ludovico il Moro to intercede and prevent the transfer.⁵⁰ In the following year his superiors sent him to Dalmatia and Bosnia to settle disputes in the Franciscan communities

⁴⁷ Panzanelli, 'Pilgrimage in Hyperreality', pp. 123–24, argues that the chapels were originally decorated solely with frescoes, but the evidence for the early use of statues is clear: for example, the group of figures lamenting over the dead Christ, dating from the 1490s, now in the municipal art gallery in Varallo.

⁴⁸ Galante Garrone, *L'apparato scenico del dramma sacro in Italia*. For the opposing view, see Ventrone, 'I Sacri Monti'.

⁴⁹ Panzanelli, 'Pilgrimage in Hyperreality', pp. 2–10; Cannon-Brookes, 'The Sacri Monti of Lombardy and Piedmont', p. 287; Verdon, *The Art of Guido Mazzoni*, chap. 1.

⁵⁰ Morisi, 'Bernardino Caimi', p. 349; Panzanelli, 'Pilgrimage in Hyperreality', pp. 129–38.

there, but after this mission he returned to Varallo and seems to have remained there until his death on 6 February 1500.⁵¹

We know very little about the artists and masons that Caimi employed on the Sacro Monte. The Milanese brothers Giovanni Pietro and Giovanni Ambrogio de' Donati carved the wooden mourning figures in the chapel of the Anointment; the other artists and builders were probably local men. The Val Sesia produced many talented artists, woodcarvers, and stonemasons, and the foundation of the Sacro Monte at Varallo created a new market for their talents, not as migrants in faraway lands but in their own *patria*.

Within a few years of his death a cult grew up around Caimi; he was revered as a Beato, his skull was preserved in a niche by the door of the Holy Sepulchre, and his feast day was celebrated annually.⁵² He left his Observant companion Candido Ranzo in charge of the Sacro Monte. Under Brother Ranzo, and then Brother Francesco da Marignano — significantly described as a 'master wood-worker' — who succeeded him in 1515, the Sacro Monte developed rapidly. A considerable number of chapels were added to the original nucleus, supported by funds from Milano Scarognini and perhaps other members of the *vicinanza*, and by the offerings of the pilgrims drawn to the Sacro Monte as stories spread of its miraculous power. The first recorded miracle took place there in August 1498: Caimi reported to Ludovico il Moro that while he was celebrating mass in the chapel of the Assumption of the Virgin, a lady of the Milanese court, long paralysed, recovered her ability to walk.⁵³ In 1507 Pope Julius II made the first grant of indulgence to those who visited the Sacro Monte, on condition that they aided the Observant Brothers, who were building the sanctuary with such zeal and 'industry'. Several other grants of indulgence would follow, adding to the sanctuary's appeal.⁵⁴ We should note, however, that the appeal of the Sacro Monte of Varallo, and the other Sacri Monti that were built later in the

⁵¹ Longo, 'Fonti documentarie sui Francescani a Varallo', p. 61, notes that the date usually cited, 1499, must be incorrect, since Caimi was still corresponding with Ludovico il Moro in the summer of that year.

⁵² Documents concerning the attempt to canonise him in the late nineteenth century are in ASV, Sacro Monte, m. 2.

⁵³ Bossi, 'Il Sacro Monte di Varallo nelle sue origini tra cronaca e storia', pp. 236–37.

⁵⁴ Promulgated on 22 August 1507, Biblioteca Reale Torino, Miscellanea Patria (henceforth BRT MP), (1), no. 1. It granted indulgence to those who 'in edificatione ac ornamentis dictorum locorum [the chapels of the Ascension, Pentecost, Nativity, and Assumption] manus porrexerunt adiutrices'. This set of documents includes four other grants of indulgences (nos 2, 8, 9, 12), dating between 1520 and 1602.

region, was never based on the reports of miracles or the veneration of relics. It was the power of the scenes in their chapels, depicted realistically and dramatically, that attracted the pilgrims and aroused their awe and wonder.

Girolamo Morone, an official from Milan who visited the Sacro Monte in 1507 while on a mission in the Val Sesia, provides an example of the psychological impact it could produce. He toured the chapels under the guidance of a priest — perhaps Father Ranzo — who he said was well acquainted with the sanctuary. Morone recorded his reaction in an elegant Latin epistle to a friend. He had never seen anything ‘more religious and devout’. The chapels were exact copies of the Holy Places, populated with figures representing Christ’s Passion. He concluded that there was no longer any need to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem because the sanctuary’s ‘simplicity, artless structure, and natural setting surpass all of antiquity’, and it recounts the biblical story in its entirety.⁵⁵ His words testify to his belief in the spiritual benefits that derived from a virtual pilgrimage to substitute Holy Places: the replicas at Varallo were as efficacious as the real thing.

Like Morone, other distinguished visitors were attracted by Varallo’s growing fame: the French governor of Milan, Charles Chaumont d’Amboise, made the pilgrimage in 1505 and again in 1508, as did Marchioness Anna of Monferrato. Mercurino Arborio di Gattinara, the future chancellor to Emperor Charles V, planned to visit Varallo in 1517 but was prevented by urgent state business.⁵⁶ About this time the writer Matteo Bandello may have visited the Sacro Monte with his friend Gerolamo Tizzoni. In the preface to *Novella* XXV in Book I of his *Novelle* he described their visit to the Sepulchre at Varallo, and ‘those very beautiful and pious places that are constructed and arranged to resemble the places in the Holy Land’.⁵⁷

The First Guide-Book to the Sacro Monte

Indirect evidence that pilgrim traffic to the Sacro Monte was growing is provided by a guide-book *cum* devotional manual entitled *Questi sono li Misteri che sono sopra el Monte de Varalle* (‘These are the Mysteries that are on the Hill of Varallo’),

⁵⁵ To Lancino Curzio, 29 September 1507, in Morone, *Miscellanea di storia italiana*, ed. Promis and Müller, II, 148–49.

⁵⁶ Longo, ‘L’eco di un grido’, p. 60.

⁵⁷ Debiaggi, ‘Quando Matteo Bandello visitò il Sacro Monte di Varallo’, places the visit in 1514, although the *Novelle* were not published until 1554.

printed at Milan in 1514.⁵⁸ It is probably the first publication of its kind, the forerunner of a long line of tracts describing the chapels in the sanctuary and prescribing devotions for pilgrims to practice at each one. It is in the form of a vernacular poem of forty-seven stanzas describing the chapels, with a concluding sonnet. Its author is unknown, but was probably one of the Observant Brothers charged with guiding visitors around the sanctuary. The only surviving copy is in the Biblioteca Colombina at Seville; it originally belonged to Columbus's son Fernando, an avid book-collector, who purchased it in Milan in 1521. It was discovered and published by the Valsesian scholar Alberto Durio in 1926.

Questi sono li Misteri gives us an invaluable description of the Sacro Monte a quarter-century after its foundation. By this time the original handful of chapels had grown to twenty-one, a few of them housing multiple scenes. Most of them stood on the hilltop, with a few on the slopes below in the areas of Bethlehem and Nazareth.⁵⁹ The guide-book notes that some of the chapels contained statues 'in rilievo' (sculpted) while in others the scenes were only represented by painted figures. Addressing the pilgrim by the familiar 'tu', the booklet leads him or her on an itinerary from the monastery of Santa Maria delle Grazie up to the hilltop, to follow the chapels in a prescribed sequence. Besides describing each chapel, its location, the mystery it portrays, and its state of completion (some are described as unfinished), the text prompts the pilgrim to meditate on each mystery with the aid of an appropriate verse.

The itinerary starts with the chapels of the Annunciation, the Nativity, and the Circumcision (soon to become the Presentation in the Temple) on the lower slope, then passes to the chapels recounting the story of the Passion situated on top of the hill: the Last Supper, the Agony in the Garden, the Condemnation of Christ, the Crucifixion, and the Holy Sepulchre. Next, the pilgrim is directed to a series of chapels — which later disappeared — depicting the Resurrected Christ appearing to his mother and to the disciples, the *Noli me Tangere*, the Ascension, the Teaching of the Pater Noster and the Creed, the Descent of the Holy Spirit, and the Angel Announcing her Imminent Death to the Virgin. From here, the pilgrims' itinerary passes to the Valley of Jehosaphat, where they were to pray at the tomb of the Virgin and the tomb of Joachim and Anna. Their journey ends at the fountain recently constructed on the top of the hill,

⁵⁸ The text of the poem is reprinted together with Durio's introduction 'Il Santuario di Varallo secondo uno sconosciuto cimelio bibliografico del 1514', in *Questi sono li Misteri che sono sopra el Monte de Varale*, ed. Stefani Perrone, pp. 7–43.

⁵⁹ Brizio, 'Configurazione del Sacro Monte di Varallo nel 1514', pp. 48–49, lists the chapels.



Figure 3.5. Fountain of the Risen Christ, Sacro Monte of Varallo.
Photo by the author, courtesy of the Ente di Gestione dei Sacri Monti, Varallo.

which offers them both physical and spiritual refreshment. Surmounting the basin of the fountain is a statue of the Risen Christ, with water flowing from five openings in his body, representing the wounds inflicted at the Crucifixion. The pilgrims are instructed to drink from the streams of water ‘that Christ puts forth | To demonstrate his great love’.⁶⁰ At that time the fountain was surrounded by five spruce trees — long vanished — symbolizing Christ’s five wounds and representing the life-giving wood of the cross, while also providing shelter for the pilgrims at the end of their journey.

In time, the fountain would become the only representation of the Resurrection on the Sacro Monte. *Questi sono li Misteri* records that a painting of the Risen Christ originally stood in the Sepulchre chapel, but it soon disappeared. From the beginning, various chapels were built or projected to depict the events after the Resurrection: Christ appearing to the Virgin, to Mary Magdalene, or to the disciples at Emmaus, but if projected they were not built, or if actually built, they fell into ruin and were demolished. The original statue of the Risen Christ in the fountain deteriorated and was replaced, but the fountain continued to serve — almost by default — as the representation of both the Resurrection and the Ascension.⁶¹ In the late seventeenth century the basilica of the Virgin would celebrate her Assumption with a grandiose display of figures in the dome, but no corresponding representation of Christ’s Ascension was ever built, or apparently even projected.

Two salient points emerge as one follows the poetic narrative in *Questi sono li Misteri*. First, the mysteries are not arranged in chronological order, and do not tell a complete story; they omit the events of Christ’s life between his childhood and the Passion. The chapels depicting the miracles which would figure prominently later on, may have been planned but were not yet built. Some of the chapels listed here — for instance, the Teaching of the Pater Noster and the Creed, and Pentecost — would soon disappear. *Questi sono li Misteri* therefore presents a snapshot of the Sacro Monte as a work in progress, not in its final form. And it suggests that by 1514 the arrangement had already strayed a long way from Caimi’s original plan. He had envisioned the sanctuary as a group of monuments imitating the places where the events of Christ’s life and Passion took place, rather than the narrative that appears in the poem. Topomimesis

⁶⁰ Debiaggi, ‘Gaudenzio Ferrari’, attributes the design of the fountain, but not the figure of the Risen Christ, to Gaudenzio Ferrari. The original figure was replaced in the later sixteenth century.

⁶¹ Gentile, ‘Perchè sul Sacro Monte di Varallo non c’è una cappella della Risurrezione’.

was already giving way to narrativity, in a trend that would become dominant after Gaudenzio Ferrari's reconceptualization of the Crucifixion chapel in the years around 1520. This trend would culminate in the placement of the chapels in strict historical order by Bishop Bascapè of Novara after 1593.

The founding era of the Sacro Monte came to an end in 1517, with the death of its patron and benefactor, Milano Scarognini. In the same year, Francesco da Marignano either resigned or was replaced as the Observant director of the Sacro Monte. His departure may be more than just a coincidence, for the death of Milano Scarognini made it necessary to create a new administrative structure to direct the work on the Sacro Monte. Up to then operations were apparently overseen by the informal partnership between Scarognini, who managed the physical fabric, and Caimi and his Observant successors, who ministered to the pilgrims. To replace Scarognini as director of the work on the chapels, the *vicinanza* of Varallo appointed a panel of two officials chosen from its membership, with the title of *fabbricieri*. The first men to hold the office, Pietro Ravelli and Bernardino Baldi, came from distinguished local families. They served until 1530, when they were joined — or perhaps replaced — by Giovanni Angelo Draghetti and Giovanni Antonio Scarognini, Milano's grandson.⁶² As the sole surviving male member of his family, Giovanni Antonio assumed his grandfather's position as both the leading citizen of Varallo and the chief patron of the Sacro Monte. He supervised the work there as *fabbriciere* until his death in 1565.

One of the first actions by the new *fabbricieri* on assuming office in 1517 was to extend the chapel of the Assumption on Mount Zion. They added a nave to accommodate the growing number of pilgrims who came to venerate the figure of the sleeping Virgin it contained. The chapel would become known as the 'Old Church' (Chiesa Vecchia). This change marked another departure from Caimi's original plan, which had not included a church, and it placed a new emphasis on Marian devotion, paralleling the Sacro Monte's original Christocentric theme. In the seventeenth century the Old Church would be replaced by the imposing basilica dedicated to the Virgin that dominates the upper piazza of the Sacro Monte.

The institution of the *fabbricieri* established a clear separation of authority in the governance of the Sacro Monte, up to now intermingled in the personal relationship between Milano Scarognini and the Observant Brother who

⁶² On the Draghetti, see Tonetti, *Le famiglie valsesiane*, pp. 229–31. Longo, 'Fonti documentarie sui Francescani a Varallo', p. 39, describes their library, which consisted mainly of classical authors, and legal and medical texts.

served as director. From this point spiritual matters became the sole province of the Observants, while the secular business of constructing and decorating the chapels was in the hands of the *fabbricieri*.⁶³ This arrangement did not last long. In the 1530s relations between the *fabbricieri* and the Observant Brothers broke down amid mutual recrimination. For the next two centuries and more, the friction between the two bodies necessitated frequent mediation, by the bishop of Novara, the archbishops of Milan, the Senate of Milan, and even the papal Curia. The principal issue at stake in this unedifying conflict was how to share and spend the pilgrims' offerings and the legacies from pious benefactors, but grave disputes also arose over the issue of the artistic form of the chapels. The fundamental cause of the conflict lay in the divergent views about the nature and purpose of the Sacro Monte held by the two parties. For the *fabbricieri*, it served to confer prestige on their town and the Val Sesia; for the Observant Brothers, this vision represented a betrayal of its original purpose.⁶⁴ The values of civic religion and Franciscan spirituality, initially harmonized in Caimi's partnership with Milano Scarognini, were no longer reconcilable. The ensuing conflict between the spiritual and secular authorities would form a guiding thread throughout the history of the Sacro Monte, down to the end of the Old Regime.

Parallels

Caimi's vision of a sacred space designed as a replica of the Holy Places was not new. As the inscription above the door to the Holy Sepulchre proclaimed, it was a 'substitute' Jerusalem. Such copies had existed in parts of Europe since the early Middle Ages, based on details drawn from the accounts of pilgrims who had visited the Holy Land. Following the First Crusade, an increasing number of replicas of the Edicule and the Holy Sepulchre began to appear in different places. Some were built by the Templars, such as the one at Pisa, dated 1153. Others formed part of monastic foundations, like the Holy Sepulchre in the church of Santo Stefano, Bologna, which dates from the eleventh to twelfth centuries, or the replica in the Capuchin church at Eichstätt in Bavaria, which is slightly later.⁶⁵ The tradition of building substitute Holy Places continued

⁶³ The Scarognini and their heirs, the d'Adda, retained their influence as the chief patrons of the Sacro Monte into the eighteenth century.

⁶⁴ Longo, 'Il monte e l'itinerario nel Sacro', p. 64.

⁶⁵ Neri, *Il S. Sepolcro riprodotto in Occidente*, pp. 68–71.

into the later Middle Ages. For example, a replica of the church of the Holy Sepulchre — the Jeruzalemkerk — was built at Bruges between 1427 and 1435 by Pietro Adorno, the head of a dynasty of transplanted Genoese merchants, to commemorate his pilgrimage to the Holy Land. To cite another example among so many, the Heiliges Grab, a replica of the Edicule surrounding the Sepulchre, was built between 1481 and 1504 at Görlitz in Lusatia by another returning pilgrim. In 1467 Leon Battista Alberti built an archaeologically accurate replica of the Holy Sepulchre for his patron Giovanni Rucellai, in the family's chapel in the church of San Pancrazio in Florence.⁶⁶ Caimi might well have known of it.

Caimi's aim, however, was not to reproduce merely the Holy Sepulchre but the topography of all the Holy Places. Instead of a single monument, he set out to create a replica of all the holy sites in Jerusalem, along with those in Bethlehem and Nazareth. This ambitious project was not entirely unique. In the early fifteenth century the Spanish Dominican Alvaro de Córdoba had recreated the topography of Jerusalem at Escalaceli, near Córdoba, based on first-hand knowledge acquired during his pilgrimage there.⁶⁷ It seems unlikely, however, that Caimi knew of this representation of Jerusalem and its Holy Places when he conceived the plan for his own simulacrum at Varallo.

Caimi's project may have been influenced by the cult then growing up around the Holy House of Mary — the Santa Casa — at Loreto, following the publication in 1472 of a pamphlet extolling its virtues. According to legend, this little building had been miraculously transported by angels from Nazareth after the Muslims conquered the last Crusader stronghold in Palestine in 1291. It came to earth first in Dalmatia, but in 1294 it took flight again, this time across the Adriatic, to its final resting-place at Loreto.⁶⁸ The Santa Casa, however, differed in one important respect from Caimi's project. It was not a replica or substitute: it was the real thing. Perhaps for this reason Caimi did not include it among the sites he planned for the Sacro Monte, but the cult of the Santa Casa soon made its presence felt at Varallo. Shortly after 1514 a copy of the Santa Casa was erected to replace the grotto of the Annunciation Caimi had built on the Sacro Monte in the area he named Nazareth. And about this

⁶⁶ *Itinéraire d'Anselme d'Adorno*, ed. by Heers, pp. 434–35; Franco Borsi, *Leon Battista Alberti*, pp. 74–96.

⁶⁷ Beaver, 'From Jerusalem to Toledo', pp. 61–62.

⁶⁸ Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, pp. 58–59.

time another replica of the Santa Casa, attributed to Gaudenzio Ferrari, was built at Roccapietra, just outside Varallo,

Caimi's project had one direct counterpart, conceived as another New Jerusalem: the sanctuary of San Vivaldo, in the countryside near the village of Montaione in Tuscany.⁶⁹ Its resemblances to Caimi's project are striking and can hardly be accidental. Like the Sacro Monte of Varallo, San Vivaldo was an Observant Franciscan foundation: it was located at a site chosen for its supposed resemblance to the topography of Jerusalem, and it consisted of a series of chapels containing terracotta reliefs and statues depicting Christ's Passion. But the reliefs and statues at San Vivaldo differ significantly from the life-size, free-standing statues at Varallo: they are less than life-size, and only a few figures are modelled in the round.⁷⁰

The conception and foundation of the sanctuary at San Vivaldo are attributed to the Observant Franciscan Tommaso da Firenze, aided by his fellow Observant Cherubino Conzi. Tommaso had spent several years in Crete, and from there he could have made the journey to the Holy Land with relative ease, returning armed with accurate topographical information. Conzi too may have visited Palestine, although this seems less likely. Both men were contemporaries of their fellow Observant Caimi and could possibly have been acquainted with his project. As Caimi did at Varallo, they laid out the sanctuary at San Vivaldo according to a topomimetic schema.⁷¹ Like the Sacro Monte at Varallo, it was a substitute Jerusalem, centring on a replica of the Holy Sepulchre built to accurate measurements and designed to evoke a powerful emotional response.⁷²

But there was a crucial difference: Brother Tommaso did not choose virgin soil on which to build his New Jeruslaem, as Caimi did at Varallo: instead he chose an existing holy site where a hermitage dating back to the twelfth century already stood. In the early fourteenth century the hermit Vivaldo Stricchi had lived there in a hollow chestnut tree. After his death, about 1320, he became the object of a local cult.⁷³ Miracles were attributed to him, and a church was

⁶⁹ Paolucci, *Guida di S. Vivaldo*; Medina Lasansky, 'Body Elision', pp. 252, 267–69; Battisti, 'Il concetto di imitazione e suoi riflessi sui Sacri Monti', pp. 137–42; Cannon-Brookes, 'The Sculptural Complexes of San Vivaldo', pp. 271–79.

⁷⁰ Cannon-Brookes, 'The Sacro Monte of San Vivaldo in Certaldo', pp. 142–44.

⁷¹ Gentile, 'Imitazione dei luoghi', pp. 38–39.

⁷² It replicated the topography of Jerusalem: Gensini, 'Un luogo di pellegrinaggio sostitutivo', pp. 155–57.

⁷³ Gensini, 'San Vivaldo in Valdelsa', pp. 157–58; Cardini and Vannini, 'Osservazioni topografiche e simboliche'.

built at the spot where he died. We have no way of knowing what impelled Brother Tommaso to choose this site, but as with Caimi at Varallo, the patronage of the local notables may have been a crucial factor. The adjoining communities of Castelfiorentino and Montaione donated land for the sanctuary in 1497, and like the notables of Varallo, their leading families seized on this opportunity to bring renown to their *patria* and promote the cult of their local saint. Some Florentine patrician families, led by the Bardi, also endowed chapels at San Vivaldo. In its early years the sanctuary grew rapidly, benefiting from this financial support. A bull issued by Leo X in 1516 described it as already comprising thirty-four chapels, sixteen of them large, eighteen small. One of them was a replica of the Edicule in the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem; inside it stood a replica of the tomb, as at Varallo, with a figure of the dead Christ reposing in it.⁷⁴ But unlike Varallo, after this promising start San Vivaldo failed to prosper. Local support dwindled, and the sanctuary fell on hard times. Today only seventeen of its chapels survive.

San Vivaldo remained largely forgotten until the end of the nineteenth century. The story of how it was rediscovered and brought to the attention of scholars bears some resemblance to Butler's encounter with Varallo and the alpine sanctuaries. In this instance the discoverer was another literary figure, though of greater eminence than Butler: the American novelist and tireless traveller Edith Wharton. In her account of a journey through Italy in the spring of 1894, she describes how she happened to meet the expatriate English writer Violet Paget (who used the pen-name Vernon Lee) at her villa near Florence, and learned from her about this obscure shrine deep in the Tuscan countryside. Critics and connoisseurs at the time, insofar as they even registered San Vivaldo's existence, dismissed the figures there as the work of a minor seventeenth-century Florentine sculptor. Undeterred, Wharton made her way to San Vivaldo, where she concluded that the terracotta figures in the chapels actually dated from the end of the fifteenth century and were in the style of the 'later school of the Della Robbias'. She had photographs of the figures taken by the celebrated Alinari firm and showed them to Professor Enrico Ridolfi, the director of the Florentine museums, who confirmed what her discerning eye had perceived. She recounted her discovery in an article in *Scribner's Magazine* in the same year, which she later republished in a collection of her Italian travel pieces.⁷⁵ Bernard Berenson read the article and conducted a hasty reconnaissance

⁷⁴ Gensini, 'Un luogo di pellegrinaggio sostitutivo', p. 30.

⁷⁵ Wharton, *Italian Backgrounds*, chap. 5.

to San Vivaldo, on the basis of which he (and his companion Mary Costelloe) dismissed Wharton's attribution as 'preposterous'.⁷⁶ Subsequent scholarship has proved him wrong. Wharton's judgement stands.

Wharton had already made a visit to Varallo before she viewed the chapels at San Vivaldo, and it seems reasonable to suppose that her visit to Varallo was the result of reading Butler's *Ex Voto*, published just a few years before. Like Butler, and unlike most contemporary critics, she judged the figures at Varallo very positively. Like Butler she particularly admired the figures by Tabacchetti and was struck by their 'vivacity of expression'. She concluded that

one might almost describe it as an intermediate between pantomime and sculpture. The groups at Varallo have the defects inherent in such an improvisation: the crudeness, the violence, sometimes even the seeming absurdities of an instantaneous photograph. These faults are redeemed by a simplicity and realism which have not had time to harden into conventionality.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Dwight, *Edith Wharton: An Extraordinary Life*, p. 78.

⁷⁷ Wharton, *Italian Backgrounds*, p. 58.

THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY: FROM GAUDENZIO FERRARI TO CARLO BORROMEO

Political and Social Conflict

The Sacro Monte of Varallo took shape in a time of acute political and social turmoil. In 1494, one year after the *vicinanza* granted possession of the monastery and the hilltop to Bernardino Caimi, King Charles VIII of France invaded Italy and conquered Milan and Naples. The French invasion was met by an immediate Spanish counter-thrust, which expelled the French from their short-lived conquests, and a long struggle for control of the peninsula ensued. Because of its wealth and strategic location, the duchy of Milan became the focus of the conflict. In 1499 Louis XII of France conquered the duchy, overthrew Duke Ludovico il Moro, and installed a French governor. In 1512 a Spanish army defeated the French and briefly restored Ludovico's elder son Massimiliano Sforza as ruler of the duchy. Three years later the new king of France, Francis I, reconquered Milan, but French rule again proved ephemeral. In 1522 a Spanish army restored Ludovico's second son, Francesco II, as duke. Subsequent French bids to recover Milan in 1525, 1536, and 1551 all failed. After the death of Francesco II without heirs in 1535, the emperor Charles V, as suzerain of the duchy, conferred it on his son, the future Philip II of Spain. Spanish possession was confirmed by the treaty of Cateau-Cambr sis, which ended the Italian wars in 1559.

The Val Sesia, though part of the duchy of Milan, was spared direct involvement in this conflict because of its remoteness. In 1494 Caimi wrote to Ludovico il Moro, warning him of a threatened attack by the French invaders,

but the danger passed. In June of the following year the duke ordered Milano Scarognini to muster the valley's able-bodied men to repel a possible incursion by the French army as it retreating homewards through Lombardy, but again the attack did not materialize.¹ In 1524 a force of Spaniards and Valsesian militiamen intercepted a French army near Romagnano Sesia, and in the battle the French commander, the famous Chevalier Bayard, was killed. When French forces again invaded in 1536, they approached the southern end of the valley at Gattinara and were repelled by the local inhabitants.² But the fighting produced a dire indirect effect on the valley's inhabitants. The contending armies brought epidemics of plague in their wake: there were outbreaks at Novara and in the Val Sesia in 1514, 1517, and 1524–25.

The conflict in Lombardy did not interrupt the development of the Sacro Monte; building went on, and the flow of pilgrims increased. But the fighting inflamed the turbulent politics of the Val Sesia, polarizing the local factions into pro-French and pro-Spanish parties, and exacerbating the tension between Varallo and the rural communities. In 1518 some of the country people rebelled and attacked the town. The course of events is shrouded in legend; some of the story seems to be the result of later elaboration, or outright fabrication. We are told that in October 1518 an ex-soldier, Giacomo ('Giacomaccio') Preti of Boccioleto, north of Varallo, led the men of his village in an uprising against the *vicinanza* of Varallo, coordinating his attack with another band led by Giovanni Pietro Vinzio, from Valduggia, at the southern end of the valley. Both were men of wealth and standing, and commanded a following in their communities. They planned to attack Varallo from opposite directions, but the attack miscarried. Preti and his men arrived first, alarming the people of Varallo, who invoked divine protection by going in procession to the Sacro Monte. Two days later, after waiting in vain for Vinzio, Preti attacked the town. His men damaged some of the chapels on the Sacro Monte and made off with the offerings contributed by the pilgrims.

The sack of the Sacro Monte by Preti's men conveyed a political message. It was a symbolic blow against the sanctuary's patrons, the civic elite of Varallo. It gave vent to the anger of the country people against the town's notables, who dominated and exploited them. But the people of Varallo — who perhaps had come to consider the Sacro Monte part of their own civic identity — rallied to repel the attackers and launched a night attack on their camp, tying lighted

¹ Longo, 'Alle origini del Sacro Monte di Varallo', pp. 27, 66.

² Rizzi, *Storia della Valsesia*, p. 233; Tonetti, *Storia della Vallesesia*, p. 454.

slowmatches to the horns of a flock of goats and sheep: the rebels fled, thinking they were under attack by a large force with firearms. Vinzio and his band arrived soon afterwards, too late, and had to disperse.³

Peace was not restored, however. Alberto Giordano, another ex-soldier, a man of gigantic stature, led another uprising, apparently during Carnival in 1519. He was the consul of the village of Fobello in the valley of the Mastallone north of Varallo. At a meeting of the General Council he had voiced the grievances of his community against the *vicinanza* of Varallo, and denounced them as tyrants. A brawl ensued, he was ejected from the Council chamber, and one of his servants was killed. Eager for revenge, he infiltrated a band of armed followers into the town during Carnival, and when the General Council assembled, his men attacked the hall where it was meeting and murdered several of the members. Among them were members of the Scarognini, Draghetti, and Ravelli families, so Giordano's revolt looks suspiciously like a settling of accounts between feuding clans. This time the intruders did not attack the Sacro Monte, and as before, the townspeople of Varallo rose up and expelled them. But the authority of the *vicinanza* and the General Council was badly shaken by this second insurrection. Disorder spread through the Val Sesia as Giordano, Vinzio, and Preti, with their armed bands, lorded it over their localities, as did other strongmen where they held sway.

The turmoil died down briefly next year in the face of a threat to the valley's cherished independence. In defiance of the valley's privileges, Francis I of France (who was then ruling Milan) granted feudal suzerainty over the Val Sesia to a local nobleman, Count Opicino (or Tiberino) Caccia. To make good his claim, Caccia advanced with a troop of French soldiers to the bridge over the Sesia at San Quirico, the traditional entry-point to the valley. According to local tradition, he was met there by the men of the Val Sesia, led by Giordano. On the bridge Giordano feigned a willingness to parlay, but then grabbed Caccia bodily, shouting 'Su Valsesiani! Date il possesso in Sesia al vostro feudatario!' (Up Valsesians! Give your lord possession of the Sesia!), and threw him into the river below. Accounts of this semi-legendary episode vary widely: Caccia may or may not have drowned in the Sesia, and Giordano may or may not have thrown Caccia's horse into the river after its master. Caccia's French troops were

³ On the revolt, see Fassola, *La Valle Sesia descritta*, IV, pt 7, pp. 84–86; Tonetti, *Storia della Vallesesia*, pp. 418–20; Bossi, 'Momenti ed aspetti del Borgo di Varallo', pp. 79–86; Galloni, *Uomini e fatti*, pp. 87–104; Longo, 'Fonti documentarie sui Francescani a Varallo', p. 89. Rizzi, *Storia della Valsesia*, pp. 233–36, warns that much of the story was probably invented by Fassola.

plunged into disarray, and Giordano's men charged and routed them. In retribution for this affront, the Vicomte de Lautrec, Francis I's governor of Milan, prepared to invade the Val Sesia, but the expulsion of the French from Milan early in 1522 put an end to his plan. Francesco II Sforza, restored as ruler of the duchy, pardoned the Valsesians for any crimes they had committed and reconfirmed their privileges in May 1523. One of the valley's representatives in these negotiations was Giacomo Preti.⁴

With this threat to the valley's sovereignty averted, any sense of common interest quickly dissipated. Feuds continued between the leading families, and tension persisted between Varallo and the lesser communities. In 1527 the Spanish governor of Milan negotiated a general pacification between the rebels and the *vicinanza*, mediated by the guardian of the monastery of Santa Maria delle Grazie.⁵ Only Giordano refused to accept the settlement and held out in his stronghold at Fobello. Eventually, at the request of the people of the valley, Duke Francesco II granted him a safe conduct, and he departed. The duke visited the Sacro Monte at Varallo in September 1530, where, we are told, the local populace greeted him enthusiastically.⁶ Five years later he died without heirs, and the duchy of Milan, including the Val Sesia, reverted to its suzerain Charles V and became a province of his empire, ruled by Spanish governors until 1707.

The duke's death precipitated another French bid to conquer Milan. In 1536 Francis I's forces occupied Piedmont and fought for the control of Novara with the Spanish forces defending Milan, in a conflict that would last for more than twenty years. The fighting periodically spilled over into the Val Sesia. In 1555 the Neapolitan general Cesare Maggi, the commander of Charles V's armies in Lombardy, secured investiture as lord of the Val Sesia from the governor of Milan and invaded the valley at the head of a force of cavalry.⁷ The local militia ambushed his troops at the outskirts of Varallo. Though badly wounded, Maggi continued his advance, intending to capture the town and plunder the Sacro Monte. But at this critical moment, supposedly through divine intervention, he halted: the Sacro Monte remained inviolate.

⁴ Galloni, *Uomini e fatti*, p. 105; Longo, 'Il Sacro Monte di Varallo', pp. 42–44.

⁵ Fassola, *La Valle Sesia descritta*, iv, pt 7, p. 89.

⁶ Tonetti, *Storia della Vallesesia*, p. 433.

⁷ Fassola, *La Nuova Gierusalemme*, pp. 25–28; on Maggi (c. 1488–1568), see Teodori, 'Maggi, Girolamo'.

According to one account, as Maggi and his men advanced up the ramp to the sanctuary, their horses balked and kneeled down; when urged forward a second and a third time, they kneeled again and refused to go on. Maggi then looked up towards the Sacro Monte, realized that Varallo was protected by divine power, abandoned his sacrilegious plan, and had himself carried up to worship at the Holy Sepulchre. Another version of the event ascribes Maggi's change of heart to the intervention of the Virgin Mary. She caused his horse to stop in its track — in a miracle recalling Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus — thus thwarting his wicked design. Converted by this miracle, Maggi became a generous benefactor of the Sacro Monte and erected a chapel halfway up the processional route to the sanctuary, at the spot where his horse had halted. He was buried there in 1568.⁸

Reports of a miracle like this would have found a ready audience in Varallo, where the religious fervour that had inspired the foundation of the Sacro Monte was intensifying under the influence of the militant piety propagated by the Counter-Reformation.⁹ One sign of this religious renewal was the foundation of three confraternities, or devotional associations of lay people. The civic elite naturally assumed a leading role in this movement. The confraternity of the Santissimo Sacramento at Varallo, which met for prayer and devotional exercises in the church of San Gaudenzio, became an affiliate of its patron confraternity at Rome in 1546. The confraternity of Santa Marta, founded at an earlier date, affiliated with its patronal body in 1583. The confraternity of the Santissima Trinità was established in 1556 to manage the town's newly founded hospital. Its membership ranged from about 60 to 140, drawn almost entirely from Varallo's prominent families, and included a few women — a rarity, since most confraternities did not admit females. The members met regularly for services at the church of San Giacomo and convened twice a year to elect a leader, or Prior, and the board that ran the hospital. This was a modest building; when Bishop Bascapè visited Varallo in 1593 he found it had only four rooms to house its patients, pilgrims in need of succour, and a few orphans. Bascapè was dismayed to find male and female patients in the same rooms. Gradually the hospital was enlarged, and by 1763 it had fourteen beds for patients and six for indigent pilgrims, with the sexes now decorously segregated. In addition to these devotional associations, there were other small charities that distributed

⁸ Fassola, *La Nuova Gierusalemme*, pp. 25–28.

⁹ I use the term 'Counter-Reformation', instead of the other accepted term, 'Catholic Reform'.

food to the poor, like the company of the Santissimo Spirito; they too were led by scions of the town's leading families.¹⁰

Gaudenzio Ferrari and the Sacro Monte

The death of Milano Scarognini in 1517 and the appointment of the *fabbricieri* opened a new era in the development of the Sacro Monte, dominated by the powerful artistic presence of Gaudenzio Ferrari. He was born sometime between 1475 and 1480 at Valduggia, in the southern part of the Val Sesia, and died in 1546 at Milan. For a long time he was little known or appreciated outside Lombardy; Vasari delivered a cursory, lukewarm judgement on his work, which most subsequent writers have followed. But the Milanese painter and theorist Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo (1538–1600), in his *Idea del Tempio della Pittura*, published in 1590, accorded him high praise. Lomazzo placed Gaudenzio among the seven supreme artists he named as 'Governors of his temple of painting', second only to Michelangelo, and flanked by Leonardo, Raphael, Mantegna, and Titian, together with the Lombard painter Polidoro Caldara da Caravaggio.¹¹ Lomazzo specially praised Gaudenzio's Crucifixion chapel at Varallo, which for him demonstrated to the full the artist's skill in composition and his brilliance as a *plasticatore*, or modeller of figures. His elevation of Gaudenzio to the highest rank among the artists of his time was perhaps motivated by a kind of filial piety, for Lomazzo had trained in Milan under one of Gaudenzio's pupils, Giovanni Battista della Cerva.¹² His praise for Gaudenzio and Polidoro can also be read as a vindication of Lombard painters against Vasari's exaltation of the Tuscans. But while Lomazzo's treatise languished in relative obscurity, Vasari's *Lives* achieved canonical status, and Gaudenzio remained largely unknown outside his native region. In the early nineteenth century, the Valsesian artist Ignazio Gaudenzio Bordiga (1773–1837) published two volumes celebrating his career, one of them illustrated with engravings of his paintings. Bordiga's explicit intention was to refute Vasari's dismiss-

¹⁰ Cagna, 'La Confraternita della Santissima Trinità', pp. 202–05.

¹¹ Lomazzo, *Scritti sulle arti*, ed. by Ciardi, I, chap. 9; Lomazzo, *Idea of the Temple of Painting*, ed. and trans. by Chai, pp. 75–77; Göttler, 'The Temptation of the Senses at the Sacro Monte of Varallo', pp. 202–08.

¹² Lomazzo, *Scritti sulle arti*, ed. by Ciardi, II, 101: 'Il mio vecchio precettore Gaudenzio, non solamente saggio pittore, come ho detto altrove, ma profundissimo filosofo e matematico.'

ive verdict and make Gaudenzio's work better known.¹³ Another biography appeared in 1869.¹⁴ His critical fortunes had begun to revive.

In the later nineteenth century, following Vasari, connoisseurs like Pater and Berenson made passing mention of Gaudenzio's work, which they evaluated as the product of his origin in the remote and supposedly primitive Val Sesia. This led them to dismiss him as a second-rank artist of the Lombard school, itself far below the empyrean heights of Renaissance Florence and Rome. Pater saw in Gaudenzio's work 'some kinship with the temper of a mountain people', while Berenson's assessment was even more condescending: 'he was by temperament an energetic mountaineer, with a certain coarse strength and forcefulness'.¹⁵ These opinions, in line with contemporary criticism, were clearly based on what could only have been a cursory acquaintance with Gaudenzio's extensive artistic production; in particular, they failed to take into account the originality and emotive power of his work at Varallo. For both these critics, the terracotta sculptures set against fresco backgrounds in the chapels Gaudenzio created for the Sacro Monte were unworthy of serious consideration—just as they were for Kugler, Layard, and von Zahn.

But not for Samuel Butler and Edith Wharton, or Ethel Halsey. In contrast to the summary judgements of Pater and Berenson, her work provided a thorough, nuanced evaluation of Gaudenzio's entire oeuvre, based on a study of his works in situ, and on the secondary works and documentary materials then available. Her verdict is confirmed by the work of later scholars—Anna Maria Brizio, Casimiro Debiaggi, Elena De Filippis, Luigi Mallé, Giovanni Romano, Rossana Sacchi, and Giovanni Testori, and the ground-breaking exhibition of his work in 1956.¹⁶ Gaudenzio is now appreciated as a versatile, inventive artist of great technical skill and emotional power, whose work totally transformed the Sacro Monte, setting the tone and providing the conceptual model for the later generations of artists who worked there.

Gaudenzio's father was reputedly a painter, but nothing is known of his work. Gaudenzio apparently followed in this family tradition, training as an

¹³ Bordiga, *Notizie intorno alle opere di Gaudenzio Ferrari*; Bordiga, *Le opere del pittore e plastificatore Gaudenzio Ferrari*.

¹⁴ Zambelli, *Della vita e delle opere di Gaudenzio Ferrari*.

¹⁵ Pater, 'Art Notes in Northern Italy', p. 93; Berenson, *The Italian Painters of the Renaissance*, p. 186.

¹⁶ Brizio, Testori, and Bertini, *Mostra di Gaudenzio Ferrari*; cf. Viale, *Gaudenzio Ferrari*, and Testori's later works on Gaudenzio: *Gaudenzio alle porte di Varallo*, on the Loreto chapel just outside Varallo, and *Il gran teatro montano*.





Figure 4.1.
Gaudenzio Ferrari, The Life of Christ. 1513. Fresco cycle in Santa Maria delle Grazie, Varallo. Photo from Wikimedia Commons.

apprentice with the Milanese artist Stefano Scotto.¹⁷ Between 1493 and 1495, he was working at Varallo, probably as Scotto's assistant; two angels frescoed in the Tomb of the Virgin are attributed to him.¹⁸ Shortly afterwards he departed for a stay in Rome, which would prove crucial for his artistic development. The claim by Bordiga and the Valsesian historian Federico Tonetti that Gaudenzio studied with Perugino at Perugia, where he became friends with Raphael and went on to work with him in Rome, is unfounded.¹⁹ They evidently intended to bolster the case they were making for the importance of their local hero, and to bring honour to their *patria*. It is nevertheless clear that even without these exalted contacts, Gaudenzio's stay in Rome was of critical importance for his artistic development, exposing him to the work of artists he could not have encountered at home. The results of this exposure can be seen in the power and virtuosity of his work after he returned to Varallo.

In 1507 Gaudenzio is documented once more at Varallo, inaugurating a period of creativity there that would last for two decades. His first documented work is a series of frescoes in the chapel of Santa Margherita in the monastery church of Santa Maria delle Grazie. These form a prelude to the fresco cycle of twenty-one panels depicting the life of Christ on the screen (*tramezzo*) that separates the nave from the presbytery in the monastery church of Santa Maria delle Grazie, signed in 1513. This type of fresco cycle, intended to serve as a visual aid to preaching, appears in several Franciscan churches in the region after the mid-fifteenth century. The most notable example, which may have provided a model for Gaudenzio's work, was the cycle painted by Martino Spanzotti in the church of San Bernardino at Ivrea a couple of decades earlier.²⁰ Several panels in Gaudenzio's cycle at Santa Maria delle Grazie represent subjects that he would later depict in chapels on the Sacro Monte: the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Adoration of the Shepherds, and the Magi. The great central panel anticipates the chapel of the Crucifixion that he would create between about 1517 and 1522.

For the next ten years or so, Gaudenzio worked at the Sacro Monte. In about 1514 he created the figures of Mary and Joseph adoring the Baby Jesus for

¹⁷ Sacchi, 'Ferrari, Gaudenzio'; Di Macco, Gaglia, and Romano, 'Gaudenzio Ferrari (Valduggia 1475/1480–1546)'; see the list of his works in Mallé, *Incontri con Gaudenzio*, pp. 237–58.

¹⁸ Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, p. 295.

¹⁹ Tonetti, *Storia della Vallesesia*, p. 440. But soon afterwards Colombo, *Vita ed opere di Gaudenzio Ferrari*, chap. 4, cast doubt on this story.

²⁰ Nova, 'I tramezzi in Lombardia'; cf. Bossi, *La chiesa di Santa Maria delle Grazie*.



Figure 4.2. Chapel of the Nativity, Sacro Monte of Varallo.

Photo by the author, courtesy of the Ente di Gestione dei Sacri Monti, Varallo.

the Nativity chapel (no. 6) and the chapel of the Adoration of the Shepherds (no. 7). (A century later, Giovanni d'Enrico would add more figures to the latter chapel.) Gaudenzio now adopted painted terracotta in place of the wood he had used earlier for his figures, because of its greater expressive potential. He is probably the author of the figures and frescoes in the chapel of the Presentation, or Circumcision (no. 8), dating from this period.²¹ About this time he painted the fresco of Saint Francis receiving the stigmata (now lost) for the altar adjoining the Holy Sepulchre, and he may also have designed the fountain with the statue of the Risen Christ, which was already in its place on the summit of the Sacro Monte by 1514.²²

²¹ De Filippis, *Guida*, p. 54.

²² Debiaggi, 'Gaudenzio Ferrari', ascribes the design of the fountain to Gaudenzio, but not the figure. Testori and Stefani Perrone, *Artisti del legno*, pp. 250–51, point out that a wooden statue, whether by Gaudenzio or any other artist, could not have lasted long in this damp environment.

Gaudenzio's next undertaking would be his masterpiece: the chapel of the Crucifixion (no. 38), which he executed between about 1517 and 1522. His work may have been interrupted by the rebels' attack on the Sacro Monte in 1518. The chapel stands on the outcrop of rock that Caimi had chosen to represent Calvary, and replaced an earlier Crucifixion chapel, which Girolamo Morone saw in 1507 and which is listed in *Questi sono li Misteri* in 1514. The design of the present chapel is now firmly attributed to Gaudenzio, demonstrating that he was an accomplished architect, as well as a painter and modeller of figures. Its design is based on the Calvary chapel in the Basilica in Jerusalem, which Caimi would probably have drawn and measured.²³

The chapel as we see it today, however, is very different from Gaudenzio's original conception. His *mise-en-scène* directly involved the pilgrims in the Crucifixion, as witnesses and as followers in Christ's footsteps, acting out the *sequela Christi* of Franciscan spirituality.²⁴ Gaudenzio placed a crowd of life-size figures at the foot of the three crosses that dominate the interior of the chapel, intending the pilgrims to mingle with them and thus participate in the Passion. We know that the pilgrims circulated among the figures at this time, because of the graffiti on the walls: the earliest is dated 21 August 1521, incidentally giving an approximate date for the completion of the chapel.²⁵ We should note, however, that the pilgrims' movements would have been restricted by the placement of the Crucifixion on a raised platform above the floor, and by the lack of space between the tightly packed figures.

Later modifications have completely altered the chapel's configuration, vitiating Gaudenzio's intention to involve the pilgrims directly in the holiest of all the mysteries on the Sacro Monte. They would originally have approached the Crucifixion chapel up the stairway from the preceding chapel, the Stripping of Christ, which no longer exists. They would have entered the chapel through a doorway on the left-hand side at the head of the stairway leading from the chapel of the Stripping of Christ, and would have mingled with the crowd below the crosses, before exiting through the door on the right.²⁶ But later

²³ Debiaggi, *Gesù muore sulla croce*, pp. 16–17; Debiaggi, 'Una puntualizzazione sulla struttura architettonica della cappella del Calvario al Sacro Monte di Varallo', pp. 29–34.

²⁴ Shearman, *Only Connect*, p. 42; Longo, 'Fonti documentarie', p. 43; Mulvaney, 'The Beholder as Witness', pp. 170–71, 187–88, for the Franciscans' belief that imagery was more effective than words for conveying their message, citing Bonaventura.

²⁵ Gentile, 'Sulle tracce degli antichi visitatori', pp. 69–73. The latest of the graffiti dates from 1594. Bishop Bascapè decreed severe punishments for anyone defacing the chapels.

²⁶ I follow Debiaggi's reconstruction of the original arrangement of the chapel, in *Gesù*



Figure 4.3. Chapel of the Crucifixion, Sacro Monte of Varallo.

Exterior, showing the loggia constructed in the nineteenth century.

Photo by the author, courtesy of the Ente di Gestione dei Sacri Monti, Varallo.

modifications have subverted Gaudenzio's original conception. At the end of the sixteenth century a screen was installed in front of the statues, permitting the pilgrims to view the figures from a short distance, but cutting them off from direct contact. In the 1630s the construction of the chapel of the Nailing to the Cross (no. 37), directly adjoining the Crucifixion chapel, reversed the flow of pilgrims. They now entered from this new chapel through the doorway that had formerly served as the exit, and left via the former entrance. From there they would move on to the new chapel of the Deposition (no. 39), built between about 1637 and 1640. From there they would descend the stairway that formerly led up to the Crucifixion chapel, and proceed towards the Sepulchre.

muore sulla croce, pp. 18–23. *Questi sono li Misteri* states that the Crucifixion chapel was reached up a flight of eighteen stairs. De Vecchi, 'Annotazioni sul Calvario del Sacro Monte di Varallo', incorrectly proposes the opposite view, that pilgrims entered on the right, as does Panzanelli, 'Pilgrimage in Hyperreality', p. 199.



Figure 4.4. Chapel of the Crucifixion, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Interior.
Photo by the author, courtesy of the Ente di Gestione dei Sacri Monti, Varallo.

In the nineteenth century the flow of pilgrims was redirected once again. The two original windows in the wall opposite the Crucifixion scene were converted into doorways, and a covered loggia was built to provide access to them from the outside. The pilgrims no longer entered and left the chapel through the original doorways. Inside the chapel, a new barrier was erected to place the spectators at a greater distance from the crowd of figures below the crosses. Recently these two doorways were closed off with glass screens, through which one now views the figures. So today the impact of the tableau of mourners, soldiers, and bystanders below the crucified figures is very different from what Gaudenzio intended. The distance between the spectators and the Crucifixion has negated the performative element fundamental to his concept of a holy mystery in which the pilgrims played a walk-on part, mingling with the crowd below the crosses. Today, pilgrims or visitors — ourselves — have become remote, passive spectators instead of active participants in the Crucifixion.²⁷

In its original state Gaudenzio's chapel stood tall and isolated on its rocky outcrop, with three tall crosses standing on its roof. The construction of the

²⁷ Medina Lasansky, 'Body Elision', p. 258.

chapels of the Nailing to the Cross and the Deposition on either side in the seventeenth century totally altered its configuration and compromised the stark visual effect of Gaudenzio's design. The loggia added to its north side in the nineteenth century still further blurred its impact. Both internally and externally, therefore, the Crucifixion chapel as it stands today is far removed from Gaudenzio's original intention.

The arrangement of the figures and frescoes in the interior of the Crucifixion chapel marked a profound artistic innovation that completely changed the way the mysteries were represented on the Sacro Monte.²⁸ Unlike the chapels constructed up to then, it was not a simple box-like structure: Gaudenzio designed it as a theatre with its frescoed walls and vaulted ceiling enfolding a dramatic tableau of animated figures. He conceived it on a far grander scale than any of the earlier chapels: whereas they contained just a few figures, the Crucifixion chapel mustered a cast of over thirty full-size figures, including several children, three soldiers on horseback, and even a couple of dogs. Gaudenzio was able to work on this scale because he was assisted by a team headed by his pupil Fermo Stella (*c.* 1490–*c.* 1562). Critics have argued at length over how much of the great ensemble is by Gaudenzio himself and how much by his collaborators, but they agree that the conception and design are his alone, that he modelled many of the statues, and that he painted the angels on the ceiling and the cavalcades of figures along the walls.

Gaudenzio was the first artist working at the Sacro Monte to integrate three-dimensional figures and fresco backgrounds in a coherent composition, blending sculpture and painting, figures and frescoes, in a kind of 'dialogue'.²⁹ He would repeat this method in the chapel of the Magi (no. 5) soon afterwards. In the chapels of the Crucifixion and the Magi the frescoed walls form a continuation of the action depicted by the figures, so that the two-dimensional and three-dimensional elements of the composition are integrated. The Crucifixion chapel recalls the central panel of the cycle of the Life of Christ that Gaudenzio had painted in Santa Maria delle Grazie a few years earlier, but with significant differences. The Virgin and the two holy women no longer cluster at the foot of the cross, as the narrow panel of the fresco dictated, but are now placed to one side, next to the original exit from the chapel. Even though some of the colours have bleached and faded, the tonality of the frescoes in the Crucifixion chapel

²⁸ Panzanelli, 'Pilgrimage in Hyperreality', pp. 198–202; Göttler, 'Temptation of the Senses', pp. 404–05.

²⁹ The term is used by Griseri, 'Gaudenzio e il suo cantiere', p. 18.



Figure 4.5. Chapel of the Crucifixion, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Detail: the Virgin Mary and two Mothers. Photo by the author, courtesy of the Ente di Gestione dei Sacri Monti, Varallo.

— now clearly apparent thanks to the recent restoration — seems brighter than the more subdued palette Gaudenzio used in Santa Maria delle Grazie.³⁰

Gaudenzio and his assistants began their work by modelling the figures that compose the crowd below the crosses, in attitudes of horror, derision, grief, or simple curiosity, like the young mothers in the foreground with their babies and little dog, standing next to the Virgin. Gaudenzio would have painted the frescoes after placing the figures in position, for only then would he have been able to plan how the frescoes would relate to them. The composition centres on the three crucified figures towering over the crowd. They are carved out of wood, because terracotta would have been too heavy for the crosses to support. The crucified Christ is not by Gaudenzio; it is believed to be the figure on the cross that Caimi had originally erected on the hillock he named Golgotha, transferred to this new setting because it had become an object of popular ven-

³⁰ The frescoes in Santa Maria delle Grazie have been dimmed by deposits of grime. More than a century ago Ethel Halsey commented on their poor state of preservation: Halsey, *Gaudenzio Ferrari*, p. 78.



Figure 4 6. Chapel of the Crucifixion, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Detail: Soldiers at the foot of the Cross. Photo by the author, courtesy of the Ente di Gestione dei Sacri Monti, Varallo.

eration.³¹ All the other figures are modelled out of terracotta: the Crucifixion chapel marks the definitive transition from wood to terracotta, which would henceforth be the only material used for the figures on the Sacro Monte.

The figures in the Crucifixion chapel are modelled with extreme realism, some of them decked out with glass eyes, hair, and beards. The soldiers are garbed fancifully, in a kind of armour *all'antica* with Roman insignia, to convey the historicity of the scene. The Jews wear head-coverings and are portrayed with stereotypical hooked noses.³² The holy women are distinguished from the crowd by their flowing robes and head-coverings, and their haloes. The rest of the figures, by contrast, are dressed in contemporary clothing: they are common folk, familiar Valsesian types, not idealized in any way. Some verge on the grotesque: the man who proffers the sponge on a cane to Christ has a huge goiter, a common ailment of mountain people (due to the lack of iodine in their

³¹ Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, p. 203; Testori and Stefani Perrone, *Artisti del legno*, p. 245. This is the figure that was replaced in 1897, leading Butler to protest, and provoking the breach with many of his friends.

³² For the depiction of the Jews, see Colombo, 'Tessuti e armature', p. 99.



Figure 4.7. Samuel Butler and the statue of Stefano Scotto in the Crucifixion Chapel, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Photo by Samuel Butler. By kind permission of the Master and Fellows of St John's College Cambridge.

diet). The figure by the former doorway on the left, that Butler identified as a portrait of Gaudenzio's teacher Stefano Scotto, is almost a caricature of old age, wrinkled and toothless. Samuel Butler photographed himself standing next to the figure of Scotto, perhaps out of some sense of affinity. The majestic bearded figure standing next to Scotto has been identified as Leonardo da Vinci: perhaps Gaudenzio portrayed these two artists as a token of his admiration.

By representing the crowd of onlookers in this unsparingly realistic way Gaudenzio sought to emphasize the immediacy of the Passion: the pilgrims would recognize the figures in the crowd as folk like themselves, identify with them, and be drawn into the holy mystery unfolding around them. The presence of children and dogs in the crowd further accentuates the everyday nature of the scene: this juxtaposition of the miraculous and the familiar was designed to inspire not only wonder but *compassio*, for the pilgrims would realize that ordinary people like themselves had been present at the Crucifixion.

We can imagine how the pilgrims would have reacted with amazement at the unflinching depiction of the agitated facial expressions and bodily attitudes of the figures grouped at the foot of the crosses. Gaudenzio's work marks an innovation in sharp contrast to the stiff poses and muted expressions of the figures in the earlier chapels. Through this uncompromising depiction of violence and suffering, rage and despair, Gaudenzio sought to wring the maximum emotional effect from the onlookers. The turmoil among the crowd, the grief-stricken angels circling in the sky, the cleft opened below the cross by the earthquake at the moment of Christ's death, all combined to make the pilgrims participants in a supernatural event of world-shattering significance: the turning-point of human history, the moment of mankind's redemption. Here time is suspended: past and present are one. In Gaudenzio's chapel, the Crucifixion is both a timeless event and a moment in the everyday life of the ordinary people below the crosses, at one with the pilgrims moving among them. The miracle becomes at once quotidian and eternal.

Gaudenzio designed the frescoes on the walls behind the crowd of figures to add to the drama, as an enveloping backdrop that extends its effect far beyond the confines of the chapel. Parts of a few modelled figures emerge from the painted walls, helping to bind the three-dimensional and the two-dimensional elements of the composition together.³³ Gaudenzio did not organize the frescoes behind the Crucifixion as a perspectival space: the cavalcades of painted

³³ There are a few protruding moulded elements in Gaudenzio's fresco cycle in Santa Maria delle Grazie.



Figure 4.8. Procession, Chapel of the Crucifixion, Sacro Monte of Varallo.
Photo by the author, courtesy of the Ente di Gestione di Sacri Monti, Varallo.

horsemen envelop the scene like a billowing cloud and extend it into a void. They also add a further dimension of historical meaning to the scene. The two squadrons of cavalry behind the crucified figures carry fluttering banners. One is emblazoned with the Roman emblem SPQR, reminding the spectators that the Crucifixion took place during Roman rule over the Holy Land. The other squadron's banner tells a different story: it bears the crescent moon of the Ottoman empire, floating above a cohort of horsemen wearing turban-like headgear. Gaudenzio's Crucifixion scene could thus be read as a contemporary message: the Ottoman empire has succeeded the Roman empire as the enemy of the Christian faith. It could also be read as an allusion to events very close to the time when Gaudenzio was building and decorating the chapel: the Ottoman conquest of the Holy Land in 1517 and perhaps even the conquest of Rhodes in 1522. Gaudenzio has transposed the Crucifixion to the present, situating it in the contemporary struggle between Cross and Crescent.

The frescoes along the side and back walls add a different contemporary reference. Unlike the frescoes behind the Crucifixion, they are landscapes peopled



Figure 4.9. Chapel of the Magi, Sacro Monte of Varallo.

Photo by the author, courtesy of the Ente di Gestione dei Sacri Monti, Varallo.

with figures painted in perspective. On each side of the chapel, processions of local nobles, some on horseback, some on foot, advance through an airy landscape to join the crowd below the crosses. Some of these richly dressed personages have been identified as members of noble families from nearby Lombardy: like the common folk at the foot of the crosses, and the pilgrims circulating among them in the chapel, they too bear witness and participate in Christ's sacrifice.

Gaudenzio's last documented work for the Sacro Monte was the chapel of the Magi (no. 5), commissioned in 1516 by the Castellanza family of Milan. He probably completed it while he was finishing the Crucifixion chapel, or soon afterwards.³⁴ It is located in the so-called Bethlehem complex, next to the Adoration of the Shepherds (no. 7), and the small tableau of Mary and Joseph adoring the Baby Jesus (no. 6). In the chapel of the Magi Gaudenzio repeats the formula he had used so effectively in the Crucifixion chapel, with life-size modelled figures integrated into a frescoed background, but on a smaller scale. In contrast to the tragic drama in the Crucifixion chapel, however, the arrival

³⁴ De Filippis, *Guida*, p. 49; Mallé, *Incontri con Gaudenzio*, p. 251, dates it to c. 1527–28.

of the Magi is festive and joyous. Richly garbed servants attend the three kings bearing their gifts, while a procession of frescoed horsemen files past on the walls behind. Like the Crucifixion chapel, the chapel of the Magi as we see it today does not conform to Gaudenzio's original design. The original entrance and exit were later walled off, the statues confined behind a barrier, and a portico built from which the pilgrims would view the scene. This is how we view it today.

In about 1527 Gaudenzio moved from Varallo to Vercelli. During his period of activity at Varallo he had also executed commissions in Novara, Arona, Romagnano Sesia, Morbegno in the Valtellina, Como, and Vercelli, and he was now recognized as one of the leading artists in northern Italy. He made Vercelli his home until 1535, and during that time he painted a number of altarpieces for its churches, while also working at Casale Monferrato and Vigevano. In 1534 he began decorating the dome of Santa Maria dei Miracoli at Saronno, the great work of his later years.³⁵ Circles of angels playing different musical instruments — Lomazzo would later recall Gaudenzio's musical abilities — spiral up the dome to the image of God the Father, surrounded by a sunburst of tongues of flame.

Gaudenzio passed his last years in Milan, in the cathedral workshop, while also painting frescoes and altarpieces for several of the city's churches. He continued to accept commissions in towns across northern Italy: at Morbegno once again, Valduggia (his birthplace), Busto Arsizio, and the sanctuary at Canobbio on Lake Maggiore. He died in Milan on 11 January 1546, in the house he shared with his pupil Giovanni Battista della Cerva, Lomazzo's teacher.

The Spectators' Response

Gaudenzio's Crucifixion chapel became the prototype that later artists working at the Sacro Monte strove to imitate and emulate. The dramatic rendering of the scene, the animation of the crowd, the variety of social and historical types represented, and the interplay between figures and frescoes reappear unmistakably in the work of artists like Tabacchetti at the end of the sixteenth century and the d'Enrico brothers in the first half of the seventeenth. Bishop Bascapè of Novara, who directed the artistic development of the Sacro Monte at the turn of the seventeenth century, specifically enjoined the artists he commissioned to take Gaudenzio as their model. Even though the screens installed in the later

³⁵ Full description in Lazzaroni Andina, Ivano Fusetti, and Alfredo Fusetti, *Gaudenzio Ferrari e la cupola del Santuario di Saronno*.

sixteenth century vitiated Gaudenzio's intention to create an unmediated, performative bond between figures and spectators, nonetheless his conception of the chapels as spaces crowded with realistic figures complemented by frescoes, and his mode of composition for maximum emotional impact, became the formula that future artists would follow.

Recently scholars have sought to understand how audiences would have responded to this imagery, but the shortage of direct evidence makes it difficult to determine who made up the audience for its dramatic tableaux, and how this audience might have reacted to what they saw. We must bear in mind too that their response would have been conditioned by the exhortations of the Observant Brothers who led them through the sequence of chapels, following the practice at Jerusalem itself. Girolamo Morone describes his profound response as he was led through the chapels on the Sacro Monte. The first guide-book for the Sacro Monte, *Questi sono li Misteri*, conveys an idea of the devotions the Brothers would have prescribed for the pilgrims at each chapel. A similar practice would probably have been followed at the later Sacri Monti where communities of Franciscans resided, like Orta or Varese, and at sanctuaries under the care of other orders, like Oropa. Parties of parishioners making the pilgrimage would have been guided by their priests, members of confraternities by their spiritual directors. The spectators' response would have been conditioned by the clergy who interpreted the mysteries for them; their reaction would not have been innocent or unmediated.

It is much easier to gauge the intentions of the artists and the clerics who directed the building and decoration of the chapels than it is to assess the effect of their work on the pilgrims who viewed it. Alessandro Nova argues that Caimi and the Franciscans who followed him at Varallo were aiming primarily but not solely at a popular audience. Exhorted by the Observant Brothers who guided them, the pilgrims would have reacted empathetically to what they saw: they kissed the feet of the statues, touched the footprints in the Ascension stone, caressed the body of Christ in the Holy Sepulchre, fondled the Baby Jesus in the Nativity scene. Nova points out however that the Sacro Monte at Varallo also attracted cultivated spectators like Girolamo Morone or Duke Charles Emanuel of Savoy.³⁶ Nova therefore contends that the art of the Sacro Monte was not strictly a 'popular' art: rather, that it was an art commissioned by sophisticated patrons and designed to appeal to a diverse audience that would include both highly educated and unlettered spectators.

³⁶ Nova, "Popular" Art in Renaissance Italy', pp. 117, 124–26.

Eugenio Battisti insists on the intellectual sophistication of the Franciscans who created the Sacri Monti of Varallo and San Vivaldo. Caimi certainly fits this description. Nova argues that these two sanctuaries were by no means the work of simple-minded friars aiming at an uneducated audience, but were the product of their ability to deploy a symbolic language and abstraction to powerful psychological effect. The extreme realism of the figures, the precise evocation of place, and the theatrical depiction of the mysteries, were 'high technology' strategies consciously designed to convince the pilgrims that these substitute Holy Places — to borrow Nagel and Wood's term — were real, and could confer the same spiritual benefits as the originals.³⁷ The appeal of the imagery in the chapels on the Sacro Monte was based on its verisimilitude: hence the inscriptions proclaiming the 'similarity' of the sites and objects to their originals. To the pilgrims, what they saw was real: to cite an extreme case, Federico Zuccaro reported that women and children were too frightened to enter the chapel of the Inferno at the Sacro Monte of Crea.³⁸ At Varallo, the spectators were transported to Jerusalem to witness personally the events of Christ's life and Passion. As Eugenio Battisti argues, they 'concretized' the impressions they received from the images: the Dead Christ in the Holy Sepulchre would have terrified them.³⁹ The sheer physicality of the images made them true. They concentrated the pilgrim's mind and facilitated intense contemplation, in a cognitive process like that prescribed in Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*: the object of contemplation was to be pictured as realistically as possible in the mind. This mental process involved the concept of substitution. What the pilgrims saw was happening right before their eyes, in the here and now, not in some distant time and place.⁴⁰ Its realism guaranteed its redemptive power.

Caimi did not plan to create a precise facsimile of Jerusalem, accurate to the last detail; not all the city's holy places figured in his recreation, which also included sites outside Jerusalem itself — Bethlehem and Nazareth. His New Jerusalem was a schematic topographical representation designed to inspire the pilgrims who came to venerate it. Caimi's aim was not exactitude but veri-

³⁷ Battisti, 'Il Sacro Monte come simbolo ed *ars memoriae*', p. 47. He uses the term 'high technology' in English.

³⁸ Cited by Göttler, *Last Things*, pp. 153–54.

³⁹ Battisti, 'Il concetto di imitazione e suoi riflessi sui Sacri Monti', pp. 140–41.

⁴⁰ Cf. Antoine de Latour's account (1848) of his guide at the Casa de Pilatos in Seville, who firmly believed that Christ had been tried there and shown to the people from one of the windows; cited in Beaver, 'From Jerusalem to Toledo', p. 77.

similitude: it was to recreate ‘the mysteries in the same form and manner as in Jerusalem’. So the inscription beside the stone bearing Christ’s footprints in the Ascension chapel announced that it was an exact copy of the stone on the Mount of Olives, the Presentation chapel copied the layout of the original chapel in the Basilica in Bethlehem; the distances between the scenes of the Passion on the Sacro Monte were the same as the distances between the sites in the Basilica in Jerusalem.⁴¹

Annabel Wharton has drawn a parallel between the Sacro Monte of Varallo and modern theme parks like Disneyland. Though fundamentally different — one is religious, the other secular — both achieve their effect by manipulating their visitors’ emotions.⁴² Let us pursue this argument a stage further, narrowing our enquiry to one specific variety of this popular genre: fundamentalist Christian theme parks, several of which have appeared across the United States in recent years, propagating a vision of biblical inerrancy. With an obvious caveat, however: the mental world of early modern pilgrims is far removed from that of present-day evangelical Christians, and the multimedia technology in these theme parks is infinitely more sophisticated than the painted statues of the Sacro Monte. But the psychological strategy is the same: to make what the spectators see as physically real as possible, thereby fortifying their faith. The Holy Land Experience in Orlando, Florida (founded 2002), recreates historical Jerusalem — just as Caimi did at Varallo — for its visitors to explore; the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky (opened in 2007), depicts how the world was created in seven days, according to the Book of Genesis; Ark Encounter in Williamstown, Kentucky (opened in 2016), is a gargantuan replica of Noah’s Ark.⁴³ The purpose of these religious theme parks is didactic. Like Varallo and the other Sacri Monti, they convey their message through palpable representations of biblical stories in order to demonstrate their literal truth. Noah’s Ark contains pairs of animal figures, visitors can wander through the streets of ancient Jerusalem, or mingle with the dinosaurs supposedly present with Adam and Eve at the Creation. As at Varallo, the power of the images lies in their visual and tactile physicality: the events become immediate, time no

⁴¹ The quotation is from a letter written by the community of the Val Sesia to Lodovico il Moro in March 1495: Gentile, ‘Motivi iconografici del Sacro Monte di Varallo’, pp. 219–22.

⁴² Wharton, *Selling Jerusalem*, pp. 190–97, discusses Disneyland and the Holy Land Experience in Orlando, Florida, as parallels to the Sacro Monte. Battisti, ‘Il Sacro Monte come simbolo, misura ed *ars memoriae*’, p. 44, also draws the parallel with Disneyland.

⁴³ Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, chap. 5, analyses the Creation Museum. The Noah’s Ark theme park closed in 2017 due to financial difficulties.

longer intervenes, distance is abolished. By concretizing the visitors' impressions, the images convince them that the biblical events represented before them actually happened, that the biblical accounts are literally true.

Gaudenzio's Crucifixion chapel masterfully employed this strategy, requiring the pilgrims to make a leap of the imagination and participate in the holy mystery by mingling with the crowd below the crosses. Time was suspended, distance eliminated: the pilgrims were induced to believe they were actually present at the Crucifixion. The later imposition of a barrier between them and the figures diminished the effect Gaudenzio had sought to create, but even so the pilgrims became what John Shearman terms 'more engaged' spectators, emotionally involved in the action.⁴⁴ He argues that a work of art of this type relied for its effect on the 'complicity' of its audience, on their willingness to believe: the artists created their works with the 'assumed presence of the spectator' in mind. This was true of Gaudenzio, and of the artists who followed in his footsteps at Varallo. Tabacchetti and the d'Enrico brothers designed their tableaux with the intention of drawing the spectators into the action, even if barriers now kept them physically separate from the figures. The wealth of imagery in the highly realistic paintings and statues was intended to mount a full-scale assault on the spectators' senses. In Tabacchetti's Ascent to Calvary (no. 36), they witnessed Christ bent double under the weight of the Cross; in Giovanni d'Enrico's Ecce Homo chapel (no. 33), they grieved at the broken figure of Christ exhibited before a jeering crowd. As David Freedberg points out, the spectators could not have resisted 'the automatic transition from seeing to empathy and involvement'. In the ghastly scene in the Massacre of the Innocents chapel (no. 11), the pilgrims witnessed bodies like their own bleeding and dying, children like their own children butchered by fiendish soldiers: they would have been drawn into the action willingly, identifying with the desperate mothers and the murdered children.⁴⁵ Even today, in a secular age when traditional Christian belief has faded, the power of this imagery still inspires empathy. As Freedberg observes, when one gazes at the scenes in the chapels on the Sacro Monte, one is disturbed and moved.

It has also been suggested that the replicas of the Holy Places at Varallo served as a *memoria*, evoking the places where Christ lived and suffered, and enabling the pilgrims to relive the Passion in a deep, personal manner.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Shearman, *Only Connect*, pp. 13–17.

⁴⁵ Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, pp. 200–01.

⁴⁶ Bresc-Bautier, 'Les Imitations du Saint-Sépulchre', p. 322.

Caimi originally conceived the Sacro Monte as a kind of 'theatre of memory' where visitors who could not make the journey to Jerusalem — as the inscription above the doorway of the Sepulchre announced — would embark on a virtual pilgrimage or mental journey that would deepen and strengthen their faith just as much as the journey to the actual Holy Places. The pilgrims' memories would be stimulated by the evocation of the Holy Places to rekindle their recollections of the biblical story and re-enact the Passion in their minds.⁴⁷

But this strategy for activating the pilgrims' memories was soon abandoned. Caimi's successors came to feel that his topomimetic concept was not adequate to its task; that literal, physical representations of the Passion would evoke a more profound reaction. This shift towards absolute verisimilitude transformed the relationship between site and spectator. The concept of the Sacro Monte as a kind of religious theme park *avant la lettre*, full of realistic portrayals of the holy mysteries, replaced the concept of a 'theatre of memory'. Gaudenzio's art, which involved the spectators directly through its dramatic imagery, marked a crucial stage in this transition. Under the direction of Bishop Carlo Bascapè at the close of the century, and in the work of the talented artists he employed, there would be a decisive shift towards an even more realistic, more theatrical mode of representation. Gaudenzio's original artistic formula was reconceptualized into a still more dramatic and didactic form.

Conflict between the Fabbricieri and the Observant Franciscans

After Gaudenzio's departure from Varallo, work on the Sacro Monte seems to have slowed down. This may have been the result of dissension between the *fabbricieri* and the Observant Franciscans. As time passed the conflict became increasingly bitter and would contribute to the removal of the Observant Franciscans from the Sacro Monte in 1603. Relations between the *fabbricieri* and their successors, the Reformed Observant Franciscans, were equally hostile and played a part in the latter's expulsion from the Sacro Monte in 1765. The fruitful partnership between Brother Caimi and Milano Scarognini degenerated into a struggle over who would direct the artistic development of the sanctuary, and who could lay claim to the offerings that the pilgrims deposited in the sanctuary's collection boxes.

⁴⁷ Panzanelli, 'Pilgrimage in Hyperreality', pp. 123–28; Battisti, 'Il Sacro Monte come simbolo, misura ed *ars memoriae*', pp. 45–47.

The issues at stake are clear, but the proximate causes of the dispute are not. In his history of the Sacro Monte, which he claimed was based on documents from the archives of the town and the sanctuary — now lost — the Valsesian politician, man of letters, and adventurer Giovanni Battista Feliciano Fassola traced its origin to a dispute between the *vicinanza* and the Observant Brothers over the choice of candidates to serve as *fabbricieri*.⁴⁸ Fassola's account is deliberately reticent, for he was both a cleric — at the time he was writing — and the *vicinanza*'s agent in their relations with the Brothers; his loyalties were divided, and he did not want to offend either party. He recounts that in 1530 the *vicinanza* appointed two new *fabbricieri* to replace (or serve alongside) the two who had served since Milano Scarognini's passing. These were Giovanni Antonio Scarognini, Milano's grandson, and Giovanni Angelo Draghetti, the grandson of the co-syndic of Varallo in 1493 who, with Milano, had presided over the transfer of the Sacro Monte to Caimi.⁴⁹ One of his nephews became one of the founders of the Hospital of the Holy Trinity at Varallo in 1556; his brother Francesco would be elected three times to the highest regional office, General Syndic of the Val Sesia. Maintaining his family's tradition of patronage, Giovanni Antonio Scarognini would play a guiding role in the development of the Sacro Monte until his death in 1565. Why the choice of these two distinguished candidates could have displeased the Observant Brothers remains a mystery, however.

According to Fassola, the first signs of discord appeared in 1538, perhaps triggered by a drop in almsgiving as attendance to the Sacro Monte fell, due to the fighting in Lombardy after the French invasion in 1536.⁵⁰ The guardian of the Observant monastery objected to the *vicinanza*'s nominees and demanded the right to appoint his own candidates. The *vicinanza* rejected his demand, since it would have given the Observants sole control over every aspect of the Sacro Monte's operations, secular as well as spiritual.

⁴⁸ The Reformed Observant Giuseppe Antonio Chiara, writing in the later eighteenth century, also traced the origin of the breach to the dispute over the election of the *fabbricieri*. See Chiara, *Storia della nuova Gerusalemme o sia Sacro Monte di Varallo composta dal P. Giuseppe Antonio Chiara di Varallo e qui trascritta, ed accresciuta di documenti, e di notizie dal P. P. Benvenuto da Milano, Divisa in due Parti*, Biblioteca Braidense, A. F. XII, 12 Cat. (cited hereafter as Chiara, *Storia*), fols 14–15. He dated the start of the dispute to 1540.

⁴⁹ Fassola, *La Nuova Gerusalemme*, 'Alli Lettori' (unpaginated) and pp. 15, 23–25; cf. 'Principio e progresso della fabbrica del Santo Sepolcro di Varallo Sesia', in ASV, Sacro Monte, m. 2; Longo, 'Fonti documentarie', pp. 89–92; Tonetti, *Storia della Vallesesia*, p. 443.

⁵⁰ Gentile, 'La storia del Sacro Monte nei documenti', p. 81. Cited henceforth as 'Note per una lettura'.

The dispute also centred on the offerings contributed by the pilgrims. On 28 May 1554, at the request of the 'Consules, & homines loci Varalli', Pope Julius III ordered the bishop of Novara to intervene in their dispute with the Observants over the collection box in the church of the Virgin. The consuls feared that the Brothers would move it or tamper with it. The pope therefore forbade the guardian of the monastery from interfering with the collection box, and ordered that its key should be kept by the consuls. The Observants appealed, and furthermore asserted that the *vicinanza* had no authority over the Sacro Monte, which they claimed had been granted to them in toto by the donation of 1493. This novel claim represented a serious escalation of the dispute, for it would have nullified the *vicinanza's* authority over the sanctuary. In response the pope reversed his decision and granted control of the collection box to the Observant Brothers, but did not pronounce on the Observants' claim to ownership of the Sacro Monte. His successor, Paul III, affirmed this decision and ordered the bishop of Lodi to mediate the dispute.⁵¹

A decade later, the locus of the conflict shifted: the issue this time was the planning of the sanctuary. It was provoked by a new master plan for the Sacro Monte entitled the *Libro dei Misteri*, the work of the newly appointed *fabbriciere* Giacomo d'Adda, a Milanese patrician who had married Giovanni Antonio Scarognini's sole heir, his daughter Francesca. After Giovanni Antonio died in 1565, d'Adda inherited his position as chief citizen of Varallo and chief patron of the Sacro Monte. He had been appointed *fabbriciere* in 1560, serving with his father-in-law, and became sole *fabbriciere* on the latter's death.

The d'Adda were from the Brianza region north of Milan and had amassed their original fortune in landed property. In the early sixteenth century the family split into three branches, which established themselves in Milan, diversified from land into commerce and banking, and accumulated great wealth by advancing loans to the Sforza dukes and the Spanish crown. In the middle of the sixteenth century they were admitted to the Milanese patriciate, and from that time to the end of the Old Regime, generations of the family would serve on the city council of Milan.⁵²

Through this strategic marriage Giacomo d'Adda amalgamated the extensive Scarognini patrimony with his own. He seems to have resided mainly at Milan,

⁵¹ 'Breve Iulii III [...] in favorem, & ad instantiam Varallensium (28 May 1554)'; 'Breve Iulii III [...]' (6 March 1555); 'Breve Apostolicum [...] ad Episcopum Laudensem' (1555), BRT MP, 3 (1), nos 3, 4, and 5. Cf. Longo, 'Il Sacro Monte di Varallo', pp. 45–47.

⁵² On the d'Adda family, see Leydi, 1808–2008: *causa pia D'Adda*, II, 19–75, and the genealogical tables in that volume.

where his financial and political interests were concentrated, but he made frequent sojourns at Varallo in the former Scarognini — now d'Adda — palace, which displayed the linked coats of arms of the two families above its portal. On his marriage, Giacomo d'Adda and his descendants were made members of the *vicinanza* in perpetuity. He took his responsibilities as the pre-eminent citizen of Varallo seriously. Until his death in 1580 he dominated the development of the Sacro Monte, upholding the Scarognini family tradition of patronage and transmitting it to his descendants.

The Libro dei Misteri

When his father-in-law died in 1565 Giacomo d'Adda launched an ambitious project to expand and remodel the sanctuary, for which he enlisted the renowned architect Galeazzo Alessi (1512–1572).⁵³ Alessi had trained in Rome, where he would have studied the work of the two dominant architects of the period, Michelangelo and Antonio da Sangallo the Younger. He then returned to his native Perugia, where he undertook several commissions. In 1548 he moved to Genoa and was soon appointed director of several building projects: the new mole and gateway for the city's port, and the Strada Nuova, a complex of aristocratic residences decreed by the Doge in 1550.⁵⁴ Many of these residences he designed himself. They were later immortalized in a collection of engravings by Rubens. He also built villas for the Centurione, Giustiniani, and Pallavicini families, and a palace for the Grimaldi. For the Sauli family he designed the great basilica of Santa Maria Assunta di Carignano, whose central plan owes much to Michelangelo's project for St Peter's.

In 1553 or 1554 Alessi moved to Milan, where he spent years designing and building the vast Palazzo Marino for the rich banker and tax farmer Tommaso Marino. He also joined the team of architects working on the cathedral, and between about 1557 and 1568 he designed the churches of San Barnaba, San Vittore al Corpo, and Santa Maria presso San Celso, together with two municipal buildings, the Palazzo dei Giureconsulti and the Scuole Canobiane.⁵⁵ Giacomo d'Adda would have encountered Alessi either through his work on the cathedral, or through his association with Marino, a banker to the Spanish government like

⁵³ There is no modern monograph on Alessi; but see the volume entitled *Galeazzo Alessi e l'architettura del Cinquecento*. Labò, 'Alessi, Galeazzo', does not mention his work at Varallo.

⁵⁴ On Alessi's work in Genoa, see Gorse, 'A Classical Stage for the Old Nobility'.

⁵⁵ Houghton Brown, *The Milanese Architecture of Galeazzo Alessi*, pp. 78–84.

d'Adda himself. Evidently impressed by Alessi's skill as both architect and urban planner, d'Adda commissioned him to draft a new project for the Sacro Monte.

Between about 1565 and 1569 Alessi drew up a new master plan for the Sacro Monte, the *Libro dei Misteri*. Its earlier ascription to Pellegrino Tibaldi is incorrect.⁵⁶ Alessi's project, probably the first complete plan for the Sacro Monte, signalled a radical new change of direction in its development. The inspiration for this reconceptualization must have come from d'Adda, in his capacity as *fabbriero*, for Alessi could hardly have proposed such a bold plan on his own initiative. But it seems reasonable to suppose that the project was a collaborative enterprise in which Alessi served not just as a skilled draughtsman giving expression to d'Adda's vision, but an active contributor, bringing his own technical expertise and humanist culture to the project. The fruit of their labour, the *Libro dei Misteri*, is a large manuscript volume consisting of an introduction, general views of the sanctuary, designs for the buildings to be constructed on the upper level, and a series of plans and elevations of all the chapels, with details of cornices and columns, and drawings of the interiors. The chapels are set out in chronological order to form a historical narrative. The sequence concludes with a radical innovation that goes far beyond Caimi's original conception: a walled enclosure of subterranean chambers to be built into the slopes below the area called Bethlehem, representing the Last Judgement, Limbo, Purgatory, and Hell.⁵⁷ But these ambitious structures, in which spectators would have gazed down on depictions of what awaited them in the next world, were never built.

The *Libro dei Misteri* begins with an introduction in which Alessi praises his patron for his religious zeal and beautiful spirit ('bell'animo') and describes the beauty of the site, so admirably suited for its purpose. He next assesses the general condition of the Sacro Monte and its existing buildings. The crucial problem, he says, is that they are arranged 'con poco ordine', the result of having been built at different times by different artists, without a unified plan. Furthermore, he judges some of the chapels to be of mediocre artistic quality. Next, he describes the existing chapels one by one, noting their defects and recommending improvements both to the buildings themselves and to the figures they contain. Though critical of many of the chapels, Alessi gives unstinting

⁵⁶ On Alessi's work at Varallo, see Stefani Perrone, 'L'urbanistica del Sacro Monte di Varallo e l'Alessi', and her introduction to Alessi, *Libro dei Misteri*, ed. by Stefani Perrone, I, 11–24. The original is in the Biblioteca Civica 'Farinone Centa', Varallo.

⁵⁷ The designs are in Alessi, *Libro dei Misteri*, ed. by Stefani Perrone, II, fols 306–12. For an analysis of this part of the project, see Göttler, *Last Things*, pp. 101–09.

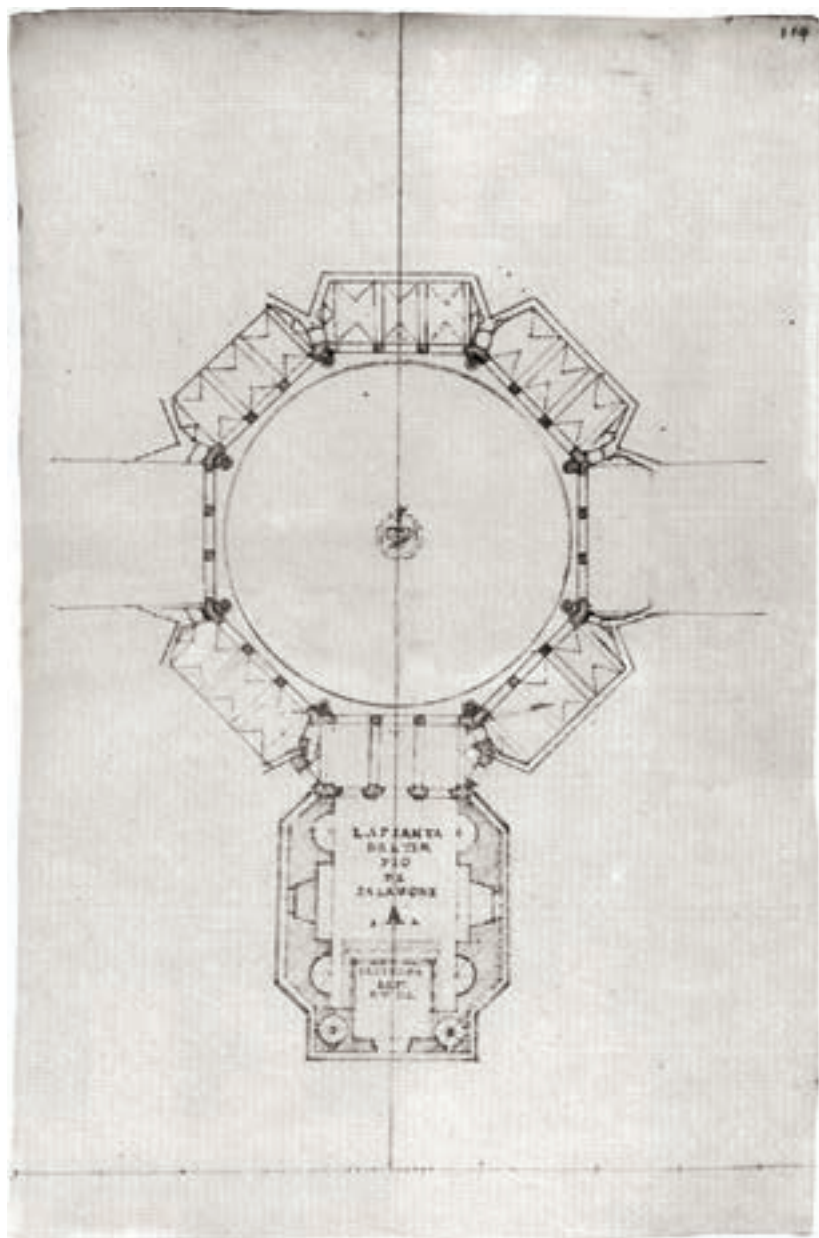


Figure 4.10. Galeazzo Alessi, Plan for Octagonal Piazza, Sacro Monte of Varallo. From Galeazzo Alessi, *Libro dei Misteri: Progetto di pianificazione urbanistica, architettonica e figurativa del Sacro Monte di Varallo* (1565–1569), ed. by Stefania Stefani Perrone, 2 vols (Bologna: Arnaldo Forni, 1974), I, pianta 4.

praise to Gaudenzio's Crucifixion: 'it seems to me that here the painter and sculptor have expressed this mystery very well'.⁵⁸ But the fundamental problem is not so much the uneven quality of the existing chapels, as the absence of logic in their arrangement. To remedy this defect, he proposes to rearrange them in chronological order, to form a coherent narrative. Some of the existing chapels would have to be moved, to put them into their proper places, and new ones would have to be constructed to fill the numerous gaps in the sequence. Alessi also points out that it is necessary to realign the pathways between the chapels and in some places to construct new paths, to link all the chapels in an order the pilgrims could easily follow. These pathways would wind agreeably through the trees and vegetation on the side of the hill, as in a garden.

Alessi found the disorder was greatest at the top of the hill. Here, in comparison to the lower slopes, construction had lagged, and this defect offered the opportunity for a complete restructuring of the sanctuary's upper area. Alessi therefore proposed to enclose the upper level of the sanctuary with a wall, defining it as the holy city where the scenes of Christ's Passion would be displayed, with access through a single entrance, the *Porta Aurea*. His plan thus envisages the *Sacro Monte* as comprising three distinct zones, as an itinerary recounting the story of human redemption from beginning to end. The first part of the story, from the Fall of Man to Christ's entry into Jerusalem, would be represented on the lower slopes. Above it, in the second zone composed of the walled city, the drama of the Passion would unfold, from the Last Supper to the Ascension. Alessi planned this upper city around an octagonal space surrounded by a portico. He probably intended it to be used for processions and liturgical functions.⁵⁹ In a striking departure from Caimi's original plan, he proposed building a Temple of Solomon to anchor and dominate this piazza.⁶⁰ The portico around the piazza was to link Gaudenzio's chapel of the Crucifixion to the Holy Sepulchre, with the Fountain of the Risen Christ in its centre. Close by he planned to construct the palaces of the High Priest Caiaphas and Pontius Pilate, and chapels depicting Pentecost, the Supper at Emmaus, and the Ascension.

⁵⁸ Alessi, *Libro dei Misteri*, ed. by Stefani Perrone, I, fol. 6.

⁵⁹ Claudius Weykonath, 'Der Sacro Monte von Varallo Sesia in paraliturgischer Funktion', personal communication of unpublished paper (2017).

⁶⁰ See Alessi's project for the Temple of Solomon and its piazza, Alessi, *Libro dei Misteri*, ed. by Stefani Perrone, I, plans 3–5; II, fol. 252. He planned to build a pool with a fountain next to the temple, representing the Pool of Siloam adjacent to the temple in Jerusalem. See also II, fols 117^r–140^r. Inside the temple Alessi sketched a tableau of Christ driving out the money-changers.

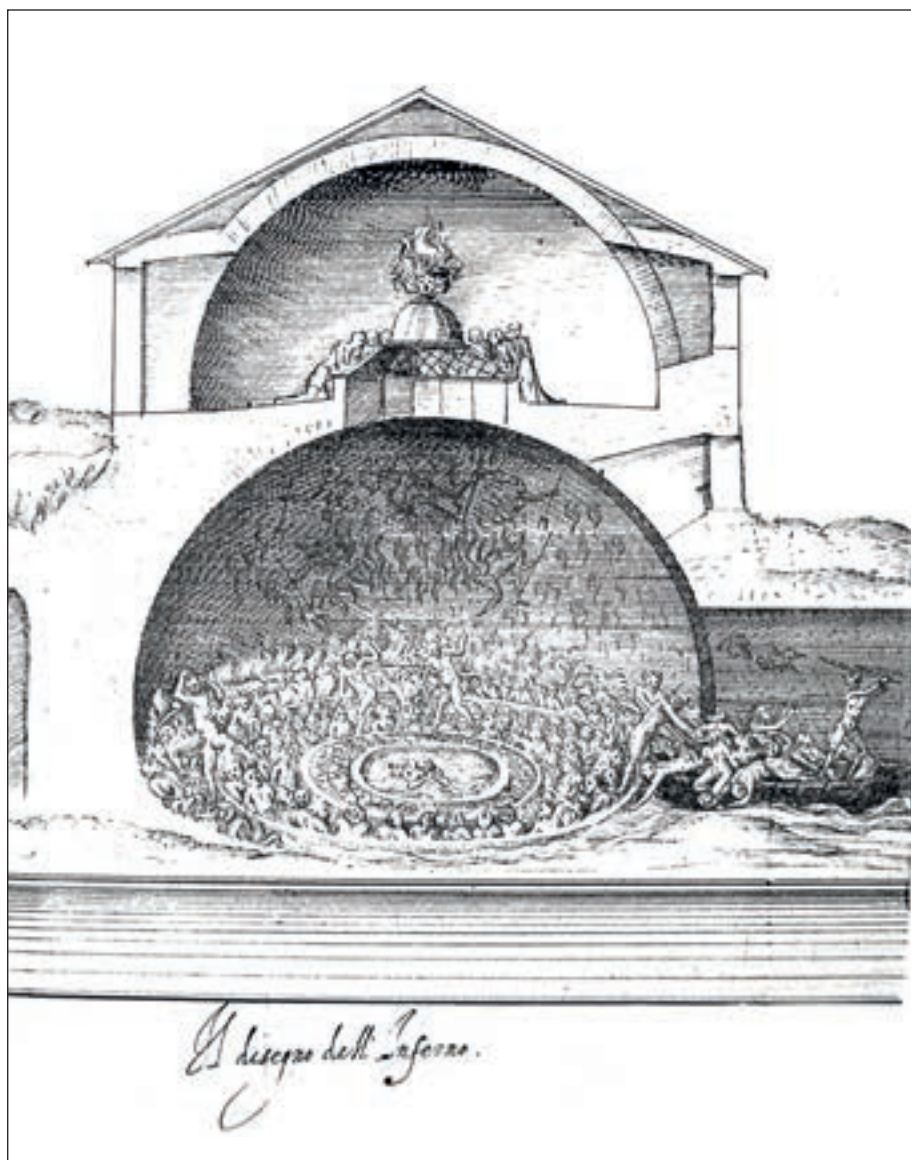


Figure 4.11. Galeazzo Alessi, Project for the Inferno, Sacro Monte of Varallo.
 From Galeazzo Alessi, *Libro dei Misteri: Progetto di pianificazione urbanistica,
 architettonica e figurativa del Sacro Monte di Varallo* (1565–1569),
 ed. by Stefania Stefani Perrone, 2 vols (Bologna: Arnaldo Forni, 1974), II, fol. 314.

None of these structures was built, but Alessi's concept of a central piazza surrounded by the palaces of Pilate and the High Priests would be taken up a few years later by Bishop Bascapè. Nor was Alessi's projected third zone built, with its the depictions of the Last Judgement, Limbo, Purgatory, and Hell, crowned by viewing platforms with coloured glass screens (red for Hell, golden for Purgatory, grey for Limbo) above the subterranean chambers.⁶¹ Alessi envisaged the audience for these spectacles as the 'curious' (whom he represented in aristocratic dress), very different from the 'devout' pilgrims who came to worship the chapels on the Sacro Monte itself.

The *Libro dei Misteri* replaced Caimi's topographical schema with a *historia sacra*, a comprehensive historical-cum-theological narrative with a clear didactic purpose. It completed the shift away from topomimesis that had begun soon after Caimi's death. In addition, Alessi's designs transformed the architectural character of the sanctuary, introducing Mannerist and classical elements far removed from the rustic architecture of the earlier chapels. And the *Libro dei Misteri* represented a radical departure in yet another respect: Alessi planned to place the tableaux of figures inside glass enclosures, or *vetriate*, cutting them off from the spectators. Below these glass panels he designed low benches on which the pilgrims would kneel to pray while gazing up at the mysteries. This arrangement recalls the new confessionals prescribed in Carlo Borromeo's *Instructiones* of 1577, with screens separating the priest from the penitent kneeling outside. Bishops were to install these new confessionals in the churches in their dioceses.⁶² Screening the spectators from the mysteries also paralleled the decree of the Council of Trent enjoining decorum in the veneration of images,⁶³ and it represented in concrete form the separation between the areas for the clergy and the laity in Counter-Reformation churches, to differentiate the sacred space from the secular. Alessi's glass enclosures did not however become a feature of the chapels on the Sacro Monte. Instead, from the later sixteenth century onwards, gratings of carved wood or wrought iron were installed, through which the spectators would view the tableau of figures in each chapel. These

⁶¹ Göttler, *Last Things*, p. 107, stresses the distinction between these two types of spectators.

⁶² See the drawing of a kneeling figure in Alessi, *Libro dei Misteri*, ed. by Stefani Perrone, I, fol. 56. For a detailed analysis of the new type of confessional, see De Boer, *The Conquest of the Soul*, pp. 85–87; cf. Göttler, *Last Things*, pp. 95–96.

⁶³ Session 25 (1563), in *Canons and Decrees*, ed. by Schroeder, pp. 483–85; cf. O'Malley, 'Trent, Sacred Images, and Catholics' Senses of the Sensuous', p. 32. The Council also ordered that Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* be covered up (p. 37).

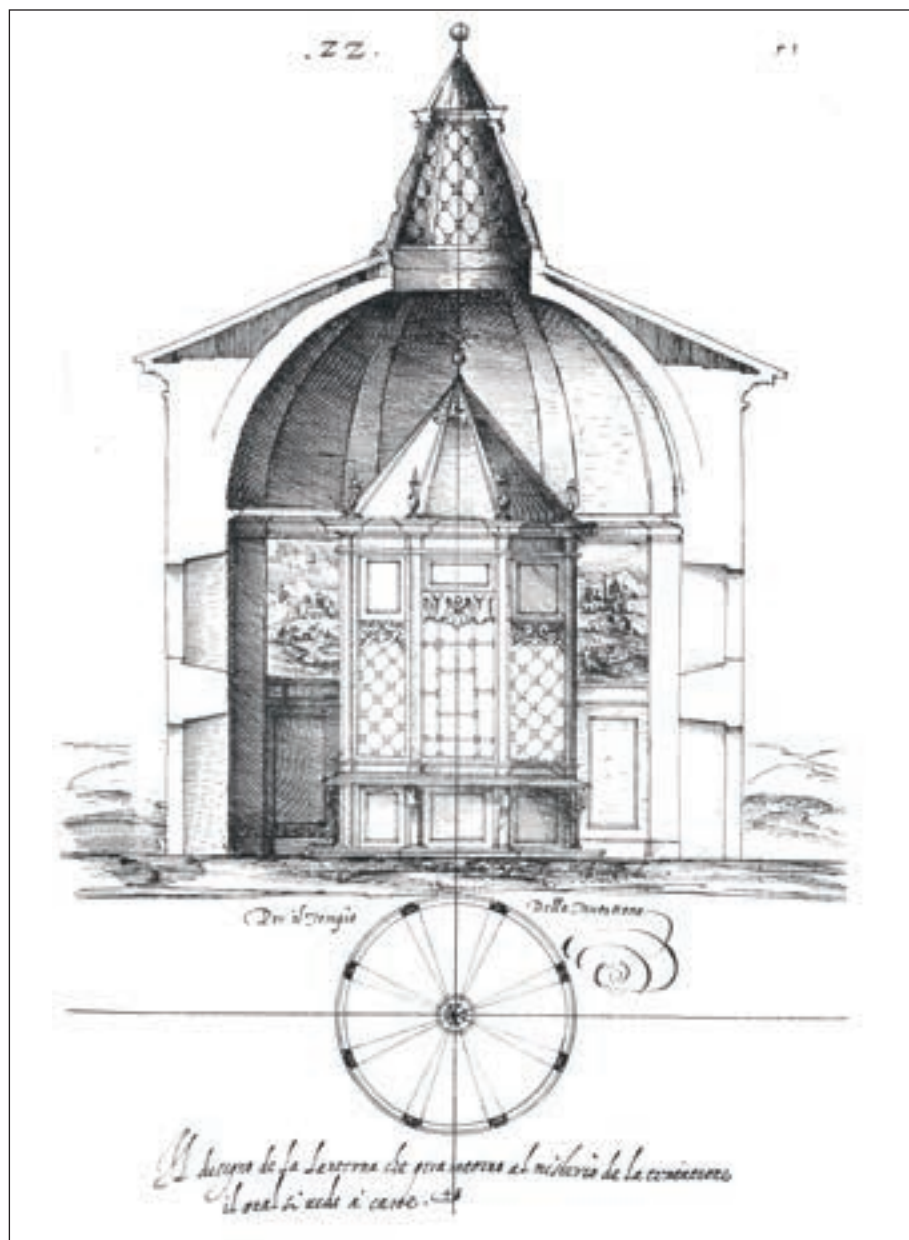


Figure 4.12. Galeazzo Alessi, Project for a Glass Screen for a Chapel, Sacro Monte of Varallo. From Galeazzo Alessi, *Libro dei Misteri: Progetto di pianificazione urbanistica, architettonica e figurativa del Sacro Monte di Varallo* (1565–1569) ed. by Stefania Stefani Perrone, 2 vols (Bologna: Arnaldo Forni, 1974), I, fol. 53.

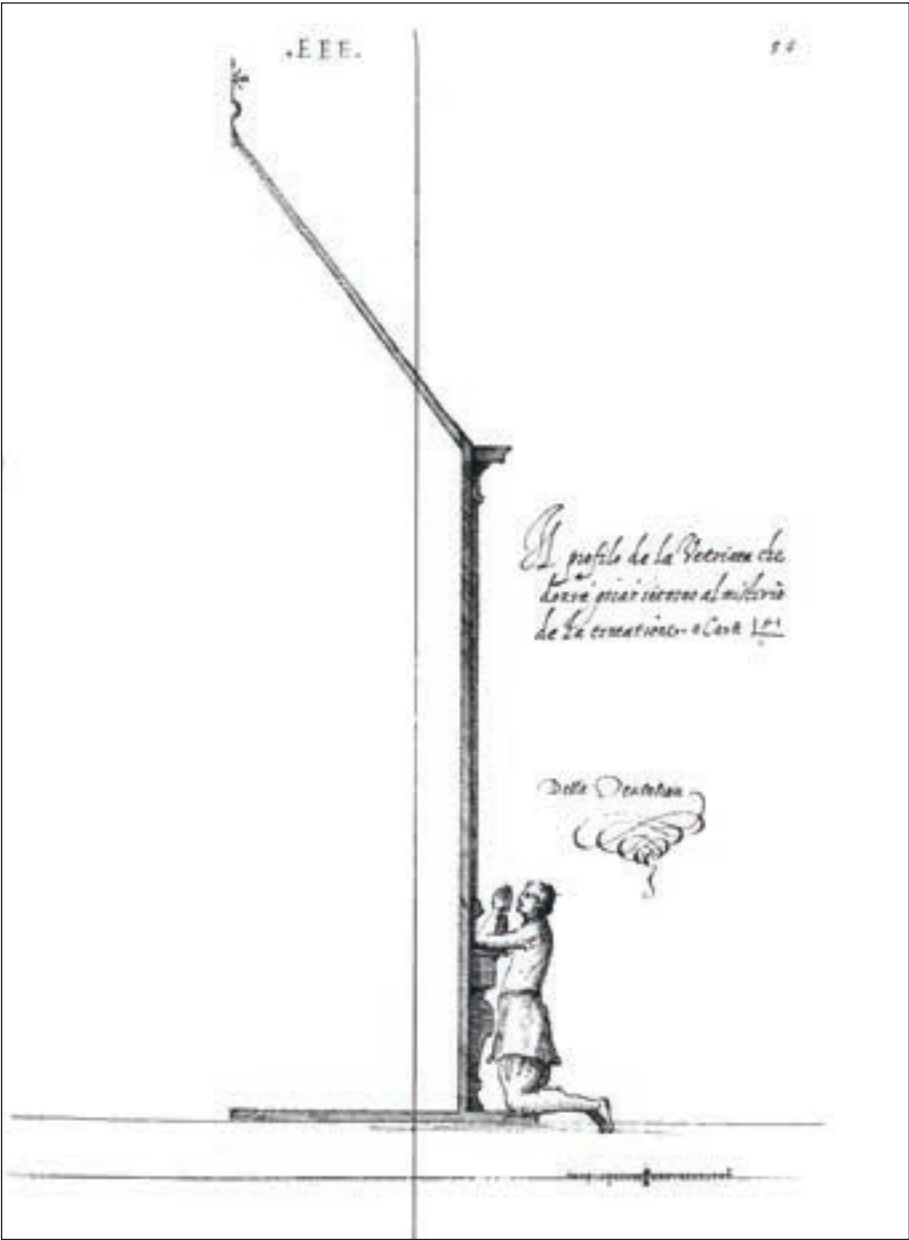


Figure 4.13. Galeazzo Alessi, Worshipper at the Screen of a Chapel.
From Galeazzo Alessi, *Libro dei Misteri: Progetto di pianificazione urbanistica, architettonica e figurativa del Sacro Monte di Varallo* (1565–1569), ed. by Stefania Stefani Perrone, 2 vols (Bologna: Arnaldo Forni, 1974), I, fol. 58.



Figure 4.14.
Galeazzo Alessi, Portal
of the Sacro Monte,
Varallo. Photo by the
author, courtesy of the
Ente di Gestione dei
Sacri Monti, Varallo.

screens not only placed a substantial barrier between the pilgrims and the holy mysteries, but also severely restricted their view.⁶⁴

The project in the *Libro dei Misteri*, with its elegant facades, its porticoed piazza, its pleasant pathways winding up the hill through trees and shrubs and its clear narrative structure, would have transformed the Sacro Monte into a combination of religious theatre, urban utopia, and Renaissance pleasure-park, a sacralized version of gardens like those at Bomarzo or the Villa d'Este. This latter element particularly appealed to cultivated visitors, for whom the subterranean tableaux of Hell, Purgatory, and Limbo were intended, designed more as entertainments than holy mysteries. Touring the Sacro Monte in 1604, the artist Federico Zuccaro (a friend of Archbishop Federico Borromeo) found it a kind of earthly paradise, a 'pleasant place' remote from the cares of the world.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Gregg, 'The Sacro Monte of Varallo', does not mention Alessi and argues that Borromeo was responsible for installing the screens.

⁶⁵ Göttler, 'Temptation of the Senses', p. 444.

In the end, only a small fraction of Alessi's project was executed. This was because of its daunting cost, despite generous subventions from Giacomo d'Adda, but also because of determined opposition from the Observant Franciscans. As the spiritual directors of the Sacro Monte they were offended by what they perceived as the secular tone of the project, which seemed to them an impious innovation that subverted the true purpose of the sanctuary.⁶⁶

The austere Carlo Borromeo, who was elevated to the archbishopric of Milan in 1564, shared this sentiment. As a zealous reformer, he was determined to implement the Council of Trent's directives and to foster deeper piety among his flock, and the Sacro Monte of Varallo seemed to him an ideal instrument for this purpose. It also appealed to his ardent Christocentric spirituality, and he made no less than four pilgrimages there, the last one a few days before his death in 1584. For him, the Sacro Monte was a place for penitence and spiritual renewal, whose images inspired him to greater piety.⁶⁷ He came to Varallo partly for this personal reason. But there was another, mundane reason for his visits, which was to settle the perpetual wrangling between the Observant Brothers and the *vicinanza* of Varallo over the administration and artistic development of the Sacro Monte.

D'Adda and Alessi began to implement the plan set out in the *Libro dei Misteri* from about 1565, starting with the construction of a classical arch to replace the original entrance to the Sacro Monte. They adorned it with a sonorous inscription proclaiming — with humanist overtones — what awaited the pilgrims within the walls:

HAEC NOVA HIERUSALEM VITAM SUMMOSQVE LABORES
ATQVE REDEMPTORIS OMNIA GESTA REFERT.

(This New Jerusalem recounts the life, great works,
and all the deeds of the Redeemer).⁶⁸

From the portal a pathway led to the Chapel of the Fall of Man (no. 1), designed by Alessi with a classicizing façade, in which the naked figures of Adam and Eve tasted the forbidden fruit under the tree where the serpent lurked. This was the starting-point for the pilgrims' journey through the sequence of chap-

⁶⁶ Cometti, 'La committenza della famiglia D'Adda', p. 292. The Brothers referred to d'Adda as their 'capital nemico' (great enemy).

⁶⁷ Göttler, 'Temptation of the Senses', pp. 394–95.

⁶⁸ 'Summos labores' refers to the Labours of Hercules, and 'Gesta' recalls Augustus's *Res Gestae*. Dr Peter Stacey pointed this out to me.

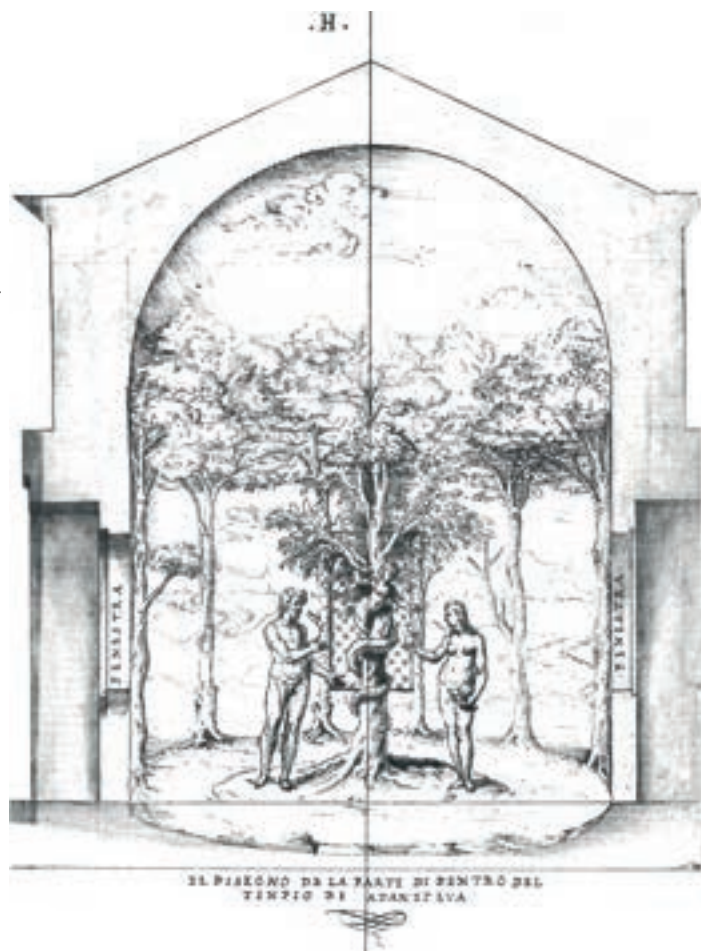


Figure 4.15. Galeazzo Alessi, Chapel of the Fall of Man, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Exterior.
Photo by the author, courtesy of the Ente di Gestione dei Sacri Monti, Varallo.

els that led ultimately to Christ's Passion, the sacrifice that liberated humankind from Adam and Eve's original sin, completing the cycle from Fall to Redemption. The chapel of the Fall was the first chapel constructed to Alessi's design, and was already built and furnished with its two figures by 1570. After Alessi went home to Perugia in 1569, Giacomo d'Adda pressed ahead energetically with the project in the *Libro dei Misteri*. Besides the chapel of the Fall, eight others were built to Alessi's designs or partly based on them, representing the events from the Flight into Egypt up to his entry into Jerusalem. D'Adda ordered the rearrangement of the interiors of three existing chapels.⁶⁹ He also

⁶⁹ The chapels built to Alessi's designs are: the Flight into Egypt (10), the Baptism of Christ (12), Christ and the Samaritan Woman (14), the Raising of the Paralytic (15), the Resurrection of the Son of the Widow of Naim (16), the Transfiguration (17), the Raising of Lazarus (18),

Figure 4.16.
Galeazzo Alessi, Design for
the figures in the Chapel
of the Fall of Man, Sacro
Monte of Varallo. From
Galeazzo Alessi, *Libro
dei Misteri: Progetto di
pianificazione urbanistica,
architettónica e figurativa
del Sacro Monte di Varallo*
(1565–1569), ed. by
Stefania Stefani Perrone,
2 vols (Bologna: Arnaldo
Forni, 1974), I, fol. 17.



began the construction of a perimeter wall closing off the entire sanctuary, in accordance with the plan in the *Libro dei Misteri*, to define it as a separate holy space, serene and conducive to prayer and meditation.⁷⁰

and the Entry into Jerusalem (19). The chapel of the Transfiguration was not completed until late in the seventeenth century. The reworked interiors are: the Presentation in the Temple (8), Joseph's Second Dream (9), and the Temptation of Christ (13). In his successive wills, 1567, 1571, 1572, and 1576, d'Adda bequeathed funds for work on the Sacro Monte, according to the design in the *Libro dei Misteri*; Cometti, 'La committenza della famiglia D'Adda', p. 291.

⁷⁰ Payments of 600 *lire imperiali* in 1570 for the interior of the chapel of the Temptation (13), and another for building the wall, from 1576, are in the 'Inventario' printed by Tonetti, *Museo*, IV, pt 7, p. 113.



Figure 4.17.
Frontispiece of *Breve
Descrittione del Sacro
Monte di Varallo in
Valsesia* (Novara:
Francesco Sesalli, 1566).

Even though the project in the *Libro dei Misteri* was never fully executed, its reconceptualization of the Sacro Monte as a historical-biblical narrative became the principle that would underlie all subsequent development. After Alessi's departure, Giacomo d'Adda called in other architects to direct operations and rework some of the designs in the *Libro dei Misteri*. One of them was Martino Bassi, the likely author of three alternative projects for the holy city on the summit, centring on the octagonal piazza and the Temple of Solomon. These designs were less costly than Alessi's project and more restrained, reflecting the more intense devotional atmosphere now pervading the sanctuary, in

line with Carlo Borromeo's directives to his clergy and his flock.⁷¹ Giacomo d'Adda died in 1580, and Bassi's projects were shelved. In 1584, during his last journey to Varallo, Carlo Borromeo had intended to call upon Pellegrino Tibaldi for advice on possible changes to the plan of the Sacro Monte, but the archbishop's death and Tibaldi's departure for Spain precluded any outcome.⁷² Finally, Bishop Bascapè, who directed the development of the Sacro Monte after he was elevated to the see of Novara in 1593, would follow the outline of Alessi's plan for a historical sequence of chapels but would replace his projected octagonal piazza on the summit with an open space surrounded by the tribunals of Annas, Caiaphas, Herod, and Pilate.

It seems likely that Giacomo d'Adda intended to win a wider audience for his plan to reconfigure the Sacro Monte. In 1566 a new guide-book for pilgrims, the *Breve Descrittione del Sacro Monte di Varallo di Valsesia*, was published at Novara by Francesco Sesalli. Its author was anonymous but was evidently a close associate of d'Adda, and was probably Sesalli himself. The book was dedicated, significantly, to Francesca Scarognini, Giacomo d'Adda's consort.⁷³ The view of the Sacro Monte in its frontispiece repeats the inscription on Alessi's portal. In the introduction, the author briefly recounts the foundation of the Sacro Monte by Caimi, then describes in fulsome tones how 'today Signor Giacomo d'Adda is most liberally supporting this work, so that at present most of the *historia sacra* has been sculpted and painted in imitation of the truth, and every day it advances towards completion'. Passages in the book are lifted from the *Libro dei Misteri* and from a manuscript in the d'Adda archive listing the work to be done on the chapels.⁷⁴ Giacomo d'Adda was evidently using this guide-book to publicize his work on the Sacro Monte and to state his case against the Observant Franciscans. To bolster his argument, the author explicitly stated that the project in the *Libro dei Misteri* had received the approbation of 'molti Gentiluomini et persone di ciò inteligentissime' (many gentlemen and persons very expert in these matters).⁷⁵

⁷¹ Gatti Perer, 'Martino Bassi, il Sacro Monte di Varallo e S. Maria presso Celso', pp. 21–41.

⁷² Stefani Perrone, introduction to Alessi, *Libro dei Misteri*, ed. by Stefani Perrone, I, 40.

⁷³ See *Breve Descrittione*; cf. Durio, *Francesco Sesalli*; Pomi, 'Le guide cinquecentesche del Sacro Monte', pp. 116–18.

⁷⁴ '...hoggidi il S. Giacomo d'Adda, liberalissimamente souiene a detta Fabrica. Di modo che al presente gli è scolpita una buona parte dell' *historia sacra* di rilievo tutto dipinto a imitatione del vero, e ogni giorno si va perseverando per ridurla a perfettione,' *Breve Descrittione*, Introduction (unpaginated); cf. Galloni, *Sacro Monte di Varallo*, pp. 199–206.

⁷⁵ *Breve Descrittione* (unpaginated); cf. the defence of the *fabbricieri*'s position in 'Principio e progresso della fabrica del S.to sepolcro di Varallo', ASV, Sacro Monte, m. 2, which states

Like the pilgrims' manual of 1514, *Questi sono li Misteri*, the *Breve Descrittione* is both a prescribed itinerary and a devotional manual, printing a verse for meditation at each chapel. In subsequent years it was regularly updated to keep pace with the progress of work on the Sacro Monte, as new chapels were built and new groups of figures installed. A second edition was published in 1578, and reprinted in 1583, 1585, and 1586, then republished with revisions in 1587. A third edition appeared in 1589, marking an important innovation: it was published at Varallo, where in May of that year the brothers Pietro and Anselmo Ravelli had opened a printing-press and bookshop. They had worked with Sesalli at his shop in Novara, and when he died in 1588 they took over the business and moved it to Varallo. They secured a monopoly from the Spanish crown to publish legal documents, statutes, and works relating to the 'Sacrum Sepulchrum Varalli'.⁷⁶

The publication of Sesalli's guide-book, the frequent reprints, and the founding of what was in effect the official printing house at Varallo for the Sacro Monte, can be construed as a response to rising demand from the pilgrims flocking there. The increasing flow of pilgrims was facilitated by the long period of peace in Lombardy after 1559 and rising prosperity in the later sixteenth century. The fact that the new edition of Sesalli's guide published by the Ravelli brothers in 1589 was also published at Teramo in the Abruzzi suggests that by then the fame of the Sacro Monte had spread far beyond Lombardy.⁷⁷

We can only identify a few of the visitors who came to the Sacro Monte. Angela Merici of Desenzano, later canonized for her charitable work, visited Varallo twice: first by herself in 1529, then in 1532, accompanied this time by the little band of devoted followers who became the nucleus of the Ursuline Order she founded three years later.⁷⁸ Don Alonso de Avalos, the governor of Milan, made the pilgrimage in 1538 and commissioned a chapel dedicated to the Taking of Jesus.⁷⁹ In 1585 the young duke of Savoy, Charles Emanuel, and his newly married consort the Infanta Caterina, daughter of Philip II of Spain,

that the work is directed by 'persone molto intelligenti e di poi approvato e laudato per infinite persone di iuditio' (very intelligent persons and is then approved and praised by numerous persons of judgement).

⁷⁶ Durio, *L'arte della stampa*, pp. 16–20. The royal privilege (28 May 1589), is in ASV, Sacro Monte, m. 22.

⁷⁷ Pomi, 'Le guide cinquecenteschi del Sacro Monte', pp. 117–19.

⁷⁸ Raponi, 'Angela Merici, beata'.

⁷⁹ Tonetti, *Storia della Vallesesia*, p. 482; it was the original chapel dedicated to the Taking of Christ, replaced by the present chapel in 1619; De Filippis, *Guida*, p. 90.

visited the shrine and were so moved that they commissioned a new chapel, depicting the Massacre of the Innocents. The duke also donated a copy of his family's precious relic, the Holy Shroud, to the Sacro Monte, where it hung above the altar in the chapel of the Last Supper.⁸⁰

Reports indicate, however, that some visitors to the Sacro Monte, less august than Charles Emanuel and his consort, and less pious than Angela Merici and her companions, did not always comport themselves with due respect. They damaged the buildings and the fountain, defaced the frescoes, and stole from the collection boxes.⁸¹ We know from periodic bans that 'scandalous women' frequented the sanctuary, that persons solicited money from pilgrims that should have supported the work of building, and that local people acted as unofficial guides and demanded payment for their services.⁸²

The Era of Carlo Borromeo

The pilgrim who left the most lasting imprint on the Sacro Monte, and immeasurably enhanced its reputation as a holy place, was the saintly archbishop of Milan, Carlo Borromeo (1538–84, canonized 1610). He is the archetypal prelate of the Counter-Reformation: deeply learned; a skilled administrator; profoundly pious and punishingly ascetic; imbued with a crusading fervour to defend the Catholic faith and roll back the tide of heresy. But his spiritual and administrative reforms aroused the opposition of the secular authorities: the Spanish governors and the Senate and city council of Milan. His unbending moral rigour, enforced by the frequent use of ecclesiastical sanctions, and his determination to inculcate social discipline among the people of his archdiocese, clergy and laity alike, would lead to a damaging collision with the governor and the Spanish crown in 1579, which would take decades to settle.⁸³

Carlo Borromeo was born into a powerful aristocratic family in the castle at Arona, its ancestral residence on the southern tip of Lake Maggiore. Destined

⁸⁰ Gentile, 'Note per una lettura', p. 92.

⁸¹ Longo, 'Sacri Monti e devozione', p. 75, refers to 'l'anarchia pellegrina che, in realtà, poteva essere, alle sue radici, anche una forma di fruizione religiosa e magica della sacralità del luogo'; cf. Longo, 'L'eco di un grido', p. 61.

⁸² Medina Lasansky, 'Body Elision', p. 255; cf. ASV, Sacro Monte, m. 3, 'Ordinanza del Podestà', 12 June 1671.

⁸³ De Boer, *The Conquest of the Soul*, chap. 6 (significantly entitled 'The Limits of Discipline') discusses the Borromean reforms and the opposition they aroused.

for a clerical career from an early age — he was the younger son — he received a classical education and then studied law at the University of Pavia, graduating in 1559. By that time he had already accumulated an impressive array of benefices even though he had not yet entered holy orders. The election of his maternal uncle Giovanni Angelo dei Medici as Pope Pius IV in December 1559 assured his immediate elevation to the pinnacle of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Pius raised him to the rank of cardinal and appointed him to the key office of Secretary of State. In this position he played a pivotal role in the negotiations between the pope and the Council of Trent, in its final sessions between January 1562 and December 1563. The principles laid down by the Council of Trent would guide Borromeo's actions throughout his years as archbishop of Milan.

After the council closed Borromeo was consecrated bishop, and in May 1564 he became archbishop of Milan. Even before he took formal possession of his archdiocese a year later, he initiated a programme of reform to raise the moral and intellectual tone of his clergy, to stimulate popular piety, and to extend his administrative authority over the archdiocese. He instituted regular synods and diocesan councils for his clergy, established seminaries to train recruits to the priesthood, and rooted out corrupt clerics like the order of the Humiliati, which he dissolved in 1569. He demanded the highest standards of pastoral care from his clergy and set a heroic example when he risked his life ministering to the people of Milan during the plague of 1576. He travelled constantly throughout his archdiocese, accompanied by a small band of devoted followers, observing the conduct of the parish clergy, watching for signs of heresy among their flocks, ascertaining their grasp of the fundamentals of the Catholic faith, and prescribing measures for improvement. During these formal visitations he took careful note of the condition of church buildings and their liturgical furnishings — vessels, robes, pictures, statues, hangings — and issued orders for the repair of old buildings and the construction of new ones, to ensure that divine offices were conducted with proper decorum. In 1579 Borromeo released the *Instructiones fabricae et suppellectilis ecclesiasticae*, which detailed regulations governing the architectural form and decoration of ecclesiastical buildings, and expanded the brief directive that the Council of Trent had issued on this subject. He ordered that the façades of churches were to be adorned with statues of their patron saint or the Virgin Mary, and that churches were to be cruciform in plan with side-chapels. Altars were to be elevated on stepped platforms to increase the veneration accorded them, and all images purged of profane and secular elements.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Barocchi, *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento*, III, 7, 42–43; cf. Voelker, 'Borromeo's Influence on Sacred Art and Architecture'.

For Borromeo the aesthetics and arrangement of places of worship were a vital means to deepen the faith of the population. He believed that the beauty and moral force of well-constructed churches and well-wrought images would educate and uplift the faithful. Images were to function as a visual counterpart to preaching, as a *biblia pauperum* expounding the mysteries of the faith to the illiterate and untutored, strengthening their devotion. He himself made frequent pilgrimages to local sanctuaries like Varese and Saronno, or further afield, to the Santa Casa at Loreto. But he was particularly attracted to the Sacro Monte of Varallo, which he visited in 1568, 1571, 1578, and 1584.⁸⁵

The Sacro Monte held a special significance for Borromeo because it was centred on the Passion of Christ, the focus of his devotional life. In 1578 he combined his third pilgrimage to Varallo with another journey of profound spiritual significance, to venerate the Holy Shroud — reputedly the winding-sheet in which Christ had been buried — at Turin, where it had just been transferred from Chambéry at the order of Duke Emanuel Filibert of Savoy.⁸⁶ After venerating the Shroud Borromeo proceeded to Varallo with a few companions. There he spent hours praying and meditating at the Holy Sepulchre. In October 1584, after another visit to Turin to venerate the Holy Shroud, Borromeo, now physically worn out by decades of fasting and self-maceration, returned to the Sacro Monte. He spent long hours in prayer, meditation, and self-flagellation at the chapels of the Agony in the Garden and the Holy Sepulchre. The latter held special meaning for him as a direct evocation of Christ's Passion, and he had a plank bed set up in a cell close by, to allow him brief periods of rest between his intense devotions. (A modern chapel with a plank bed next to the Sepulchre now commemorates his last visit to the Sacro Monte.) On 28 October, with his pastoral duties calling, he departed after one last round of devotions at the Sepulchre, although it seemed to his companions that 'he could not bear to say a final farewell to it'.⁸⁷ During this last visit, Borromeo allowed himself 'a little recreation, going round all the chapels and giving orders for their restoration and embellishments', for he had always taken a close interest in the details of their construction and decoration. From Arona on 29 October he instructed his advisers to attend him on his return to Milan to discuss the trou-

⁸⁵ Stoppa, 'I quattro pellegrinaggi di San Carlo al Sacro Monte di Varallo'.

⁸⁶ On the cult of the Shroud at Turin, see Scott, *Architecture for the Shroud. Relic and Ritual in Turin*, pp. 9–85. The duke had caused the Shroud to be brought to Turin from his former capital, Chambéry, in order to save Borromeo the rigours of an alpine journey to venerate it.

⁸⁷ Giussano, *The Life of St Charles Borromeo*, II, 240; Bascapè, *Della vita*, pp. 561–69.

bles between the Observants Brothers and the *fabbricieri*. Pellegrino Tibaldi was also to attend, in order to discuss the architecture of the Sacro Monte,⁸⁸ but this meeting never took place. Borromeo returned to Milan and died there on 3 November.⁸⁹

During this visit Borromeo made an attempt to settle the disputes between the *fabbricieri* and the Observant Brothers. It was the last of several failed efforts to make peace at the Sacro Monte. In 1568 he had made his first visit to Varallo in obedience to an order from the pope to resolve the dispute over the collection boxes. He ordered that henceforth there were to be two boxes, one for the Brothers and one for the *fabbricieri*. The *fabbricieri* rejected this compromise, and the Council of the Curia Superiore of the Val Sesia petitioned Borromeo and sent envoys to Milan to plead their case.⁹⁰ In September 1570 he reaffirmed his decision.

The dispute then took a new turn: the Observants objected to the changes in the form and fabric of the Sacro Monte that Giacomo d'Adda was carrying out according to the plan in the *Libro dei Misteri*. The Brothers were especially offended by the demolition of the chapel of the Ascension, which had housed the stone imprinted with Christ's footprints, a copy of the original that Caimi had seen in Jerusalem.⁹¹ They also complained that d'Adda was planning a new church for the Virgin, which would require moving the chapel of the Baptism of Christ to a new site. To block these innovations, they asserted once again that the donation of 1493 granted them sole authority over the Sacro Monte, and that consequently the *vicinanza* and the *fabbricieri* had no jurisdiction over it. They further alleged that the *vicinanza* and the *fabbricieri* were driven by greed, that they had 'of their own volition changed the form of some of the chapels', and that — in an ominous new twist — they were threatening to expel the Brothers from the Sacro Monte.⁹²

In response to this appeal, on 5 March 1574 Pope Gregory XIII ordered Borromeo to intervene once more: he was to prevent any alteration to the

⁸⁸ Giussano, *The Life of St Charles Borromeo*, II, 239; Göttler, 'Temptation of the Senses', p. 438; Longo, 'Il Sacro Monte di Varallo', pp. 96–97; Longo, 'Alle origini del Sacro Monte', p. 89.

⁸⁹ Pope John Paul II's pilgrimage to Varallo in October 1984 celebrated the quatercentenary of Borromeo's last visit to the sanctuary.

⁹⁰ Letter by Borromeo, 19 February 1568, BRT MP, C 36 31, no. 2; Chiara, *Storia*, fol. 99; Longo, 'Il Sacro Monte di Varallo', p. 49; 'Resolution' of the Consiglio Superiore, 24 August 1570, in *Liber rationum*, ed. by Garavaglia, screen 50.

⁹¹ Longo, 'Alle origini del Sacro Monte di Varallo', p. 67 n. 86.

⁹² Gentile, 'Note per una lettura', pp. 82–84.

buildings on the Sacro Monte and maintain the Observants in their functions.⁹³ The pope, however, did not sustain their claim to sole jurisdiction over the Sacro Monte, and so they were obliged to compromise with the *vicinanza* and the *fabbricieri*, who in their turn agreed to modify the project in the *Libro dei Misteri*. By now the governor of Milan had been drawn into the dispute. On 26 July 1578 he confirmed the authority of the *vicinanza* and the *fabbricieri* over the Sacro Monte, but with a proviso that created an opening for the Brothers: he decreed that in future the *fabbricieri* were to be elected annually by a committee chosen equally by the *vicinanza* and the guardian of the Observant monastery. He also ordered that the *fabbricieri* were to be assisted by an elected treasurer — an indication that the revenues of the Sacro Monte had grown beyond the point where the *fabbricieri* alone could manage them. He reiterated Borromeo's earlier order that offerings were to be collected in two separate boxes, one for the Observant Brothers, the other for the *fabbricieri*. Finally, in a clear reference to the dispute over the *Libro dei Misteri*, he required the *fabbricieri* to inform the guardian of any changes they planned to make to the chapels and the mysteries. The guardian would then inform the provincial minister of the Observants, who would send experts to negotiate with the *fabbricieri* and their architects to determine the form, dimensions, and decoration of any new chapels.⁹⁴ The governor's ruling hobbled the project conceived by Giacomo d'Adda and Galeazzo Alessi, and gave the Observant Brothers greater control over the construction and decoration of the Sacro Monte. They now set about undoing the changes made to the fabric of the Sacro Monte by d'Adda.⁹⁵

The provincial minister of the Observants, prompted by Carlo Borromeo, took advantage of this ruling to intervene in the escalating dispute. In May 1581 their provincial chapter put forward a new, far-reaching claim: that their minister had the right to inspect the Sacro Monte every year and approve any plans for the chapels. The *vicinanza* protested at this threat to their authority, so in October Gregory XIII instructed Borromeo to intervene yet again.⁹⁶ The *vicinanza* requested that the archbishop compel the Observant Brothers

⁹³ 'Delegatio [...] Gregorii XIII ad S. Carolum Borromaeum [...]', 5 March 1574, BRT MP, 3 (1), no. 7.

⁹⁴ 'Compositio Communitatis Oppidi Varallis Sicidae [...] contra Patres ordinis Sancti Francisci de Observantia', ASM, Culto, MDCCIX, folios not numbered.

⁹⁵ Longo, 'Alle origini del Sacro Monte', pp. 78–79.

⁹⁶ Gentile, 'Note per una lettura', pp. 84–85; Longo, 'Alle origini del Sacro Monte di Varallo', p. 79.

both to comply with the regulations governing the Sacro Monte, and — in a significant new development — to put an end to their ‘inobservance of their rules, and the scandals caused by their bad conduct.’⁹⁷ The pope instructed Borromeo to ensure that the Brothers would not be expelled from the Sacro Monte, as the *vicinanza* wished, but he also noted that certain Brothers had assaulted the *fabbricieri*, causing grave scandal ‘by which the devotion of the faithful of Christ is cooled, the concourse of pilgrims ceases, alms for building work are fraudulently diverted, and offerings are reduced.’⁹⁸

The Observants’ demand that their minister should have the final say over the planning of the Sacro Monte added a new element to the simmering dispute over Giacomo d’Adda’s project in the *Libro dei Misteri*. It seems that the Brothers were offended by the nude statues of Adam and Eve that had recently been installed in the Chapel of the Fall of Man. Borromeo apparently intervened on their side, for in April 1583 the *fabbricieri* contracted for the decoration of the chapel according to the ‘instructions from Cardinal Borromeo or one delegated by him.’⁹⁹ But this delicate question was only settled ten years later, when Bishop Bascapè ordered the sculptors Michele Prestinari and then Tabacchetti to remodel the figures and add a screen of animals and bushes to mask their nakedness.¹⁰⁰ Borromeo was still trying, unsuccessfully, to mediate a settlement in this endless dispute during his final, painful visit to Varallo in October 1584. Shortly after his death the *vicinanza* appointed a panel of lawyers and leading citizens to negotiate with the Brothers. Meanwhile yet another cause of conflict emerged: the parish clergy of Varallo were complaining that the Observants were usurping their pastoral functions and were hearing confessions.¹⁰¹

Confronted with this deepening crisis, Pope Sixtus V issued a brief in May 1587, decreeing a settlement to the conflict, which he declared was the work of the devil.¹⁰² All litigation was to cease forthwith: this settlement was final. As

⁹⁷ ‘Delegatio Gregorii XIII ad Sanctum Carolum Borromaeum’, 28 October 1581, BRT MP, 3 (1), no. 10; Chiara, *Storia*, fols 18–21.

⁹⁸ ‘Christi Fidelium Devotio refrigerescat, Peregrinorum concursus cesset, et Fabrica aelemosinas defraudata remaneat, & elemosinae imminuantur’; ‘Delegatio’ of Gregory XIII to Carlo Borromeo, 28 October 1581, BRT MP, 3 (1), no. 10.

⁹⁹ Göttler, ‘Temptation of the Senses’, p. 437.

¹⁰⁰ De Filippis, *Guida*, p. 37.

¹⁰¹ Longo, ‘Fonti documentarie’, p. 98.

¹⁰² ‘Constitutio Sixti V [...] De Administratione Sacri Montis Varalli’, 30 May 1587, BRT MP, 3 (1), no. 11. It states that the settlement was drawn up by the bishop of Novara, Cesare

a general principle, the pope decreed that the management of the Sacro Monte was to be shared by the Observant Brothers and the *fabbricieri*. The latter were to be chosen jointly by the *vicinanza* and the guardian of Santa Maria degli Angeli in accordance with the procedures established in 1578. As stipulated in previous settlements, the collection boxes were to be separate; the Observant Brothers were to place theirs in the church dedicated to the Virgin, while the *fabbricieri* could place boxes in any of the chapels. All collection boxes were to have two sets of keys, one each for the guardian and the *fabbricieri*. Accounts were to be scrupulously kept. None of this was new; the brief simply reiterated the terms of previous settlements. But it contained a new clause with great implications for the future, placing the Sacro Monte under the jurisdiction of the bishop of Novara, and empowering him to settle disputes between the Observants and the *fabbricieri*. Citing the decree of the Council of Trent on artistic matters (session XXV, tit. 2, 1563), the brief gave the bishop authority over 'the oratories, images, and mysteries of the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ, [which are] to be made accurately in accordance with the truth of evangelical history'. It thus affirmed the conception of the Sacro Monte as a *historia sacra*, and granted the bishop the authority to determine, with the advice of 'prudent' experts, 'the placement, manner and form of the buildings, oratories, and images'.¹⁰³ It passed over in silence the Observant Brothers' claim to jurisdiction over the Sacro Monte. The bishop's authority was final: the *fabbricieri* were not to move or alter any images without his permission, on pain of excommunication. They could act only as the executants of his orders, not as independent agents.

By granting these powers to the bishop of Novara, the brief of 1587 opened a new era in the history of the Sacro Monte of Varallo. It laid to rest the conflict provoked by Giacomo d'Adda's ambitious project to reconstruct the sanctuary, by placing control of future building and decoration in the hands of the bishop of Novara. Armed with this authority, successive bishops would closely supervise the construction and decoration of the chapels. First and foremost of them was Carlo Bascapè, a devoted disciple of Carlo Borromeo, who became bishop of Novara in 1593. He would radically revise the disposition of the buildings

Speciano, and the minister general of the Franciscan order, Francesco Gonzaga. The latter was a friend of Carlo Bascapè.

¹⁰³ '...oratoria, imagines, ac mysteria Passionis Domini Nostri Iesu Christi ad Evangelicae historiae veritatem accurate fieri, exprimi, & suo ordine collocari curet, ac vocatis, & adhibitis in consiliu[m] viris aliquot prudentibus, & huiusmodi reru[m] peritis, certu[m] locum, modum & formam, Fabricae, aedificiorum, Oratoriorum, & Sacrarum, imaginum assignet'.

on the Sacro Monte and endow the sanctuary with the form that endures to the present day.

In this form, Varallo became the model for a second generation of sanctuaries that grew up over the next century across the western foothills of the Alps. They were inspired by the militant new piety of the Counter-Reformation, personified by Carlo Borromeo, and were all situated within the archdiocese of Milan. The first of these, the Sacro Monte at Orta, was founded in 1583. Others soon followed: at Crea a decade later, then at Varese, Oropa, Ghiffa, Ossuccio, Domodossola, and finally, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, at Belmonte. Each was the product of a local initiative, emanating either from the leaders of the local community, at Orta, or from Franciscan preachers, at Varese, or from a combination of the two, at Oropa or Domodossola. Each one reproduced the pattern established at Varallo, a sequence of chapels recounting a narrative, but now in different devotional forms: the Rosary at Varese, the life of Saint Francis at Orta, the events of the Passion at Domodossola, or the Via Crucis at Belmonte. The revived Catholicism of the Counter-Reformation now engendered a new wave of alpine sanctuaries.

THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY: THE ERA OF THE COUNTER-REFORMATION

Patronage and Local Politics

By the later sixteenth century growing numbers of pilgrims were coming to the Sacro Monte of Varallo. Many were inspired by the fervent new forms of devotion propagated by Archbishop Carlo Borromeo of Milan, the embodiment of the militant piety of the Counter-Reformation. A few of the better-off visitors became active patrons who funded the construction and decoration of new chapels, as part of a new wave of building activity that would transform the sanctuary under the vigorous leadership of Bishop Carlo Bascapè of Novara after 1593. Foremost among these new patrons were several scions of the House of Savoy, which ruled the state of Piedmont, west of Lombardy and the Val Sesia. The motives behind their patronage were complex. In part they were seeking to make a public display of their devotion to the Catholic faith. As self-proclaimed champions of the Counter-Reformation, they were engaged on a crusade against heresy, and by the end of the sixteenth century they had almost eradicated Protestantism from their domains. But their religious patronage had a political dimension too: it burnished the prestige of the House of Savoy, and helped rekindle the loyalty of its subjects, undermined by a generation of French and Spanish occupation during the Italian wars.

Duke Emanuel Filibert, who reigned from 1553 to 1580, led the Catholic restoration in his domains, working in close cooperation with the ecclesiastical authorities. The duke revered Carlo Borromeo; in 1578 he invited him to Turin to venerate the Holy Shroud, the famous relic that had been the property of the House of Savoy for over a century.¹ Borromeo repeated this pilgrimage

¹ Giussano, *The Life of St Charles Borromeo*, II, 32–34. Cf. Scott, *Architecture for the Shroud*, chaps 1–3.

in 1582 and 1584. Emanuel Filibert's son Charles Emanuel, who succeeded him in 1580, continued his father's tradition of religious patronage and public piety, and remained a devoted admirer of Carlo Borromeo.

In 1585, perhaps to honour the memory of Borromeo, who had died the previous year, Charles Emanuel made a state visit to the Sacro Monte accompanied by members of his court and his new consort, the Infanta Caterina, daughter of Philip II. During this visit they decided to endow a new chapel, depicting the Massacre of the Innocents. It was to replace an earlier chapel devoted to the same subject, but on a grander scale, befitting its patrons' exalted status. The building was completed in 1586, and was then furnished with figures by Cristoforo Bargnola di Valsolda and Michelangelo Rossetti da Claino, both from the region of Lake Como. A few years later, Bishop Bascapè would order more figures to be added to the scene in order to increase its emotional impact. The porch of the Innocents chapel still bears the arms of the House of Savoy, as a reminder of Duke Charles Emanuel's piety and liberality.

He was not the only member of his dynasty to patronize the Sacro Monte. In 1572 his half-sister Matilda, marchioness of Pianezza, an illegitimate daughter of Duke Emanuel Filibert, financed the building of a chapel depicting one of Christ's miracles: the raising of the son of the widow of Naim (no. 16).² In 1587 Charles Emanuel's distant cousin Claudia, from the junior branch of Savoia-Raconigi, widow of Besso Ferrero-Fieschi, marquis of Masserano, commissioned a chapel in memory of her husband, who had died in 1584. It was to depict the nailing of Christ to the cross and was to be located next to the Crucifixion chapel. Both Claudia and her husband were devoted to Carlo Borromeo, to whose family Besso was related.³ In August 1589 the *fabbricieri* awarded the contract for this chapel to a mason from Alagna, Giacomo Igonotto. The structure was finished by 1597, but Bascapè ordered it to be repurposed to represent the Ascent to Calvary (no. 36). Later, in 1632, a new chapel was constructed adjoining the Crucifixion to house the Nailing to the Cross (no. 37), placing it between the Ascent to Calvary and the Crucifixion.⁴

Duke Charles Emanuel maintained his close interest in the Sacro Monte of Varallo, expanding his role as patron and advocate. He interceded with

² The figures are made of gesso, not terracotta. Stefani Perrone, 'Varallo', p. 157; De Filipis, *Guida*, p. 121.

³ During his last journey to Varallo in 1584, Borromeo stopped to console Besso on his deathbed, and later returned to officiate at his obsequies.

⁴ Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, p. 166.

Pope Sixtus V to secure a grant of plenary indulgence for those who visited the Sacro Monte on Easter Sunday and the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. In 1605 the *vicinanza* elected him an honorary member and gave him the titles of Honorary *Fabbriciere* and Protector of the Sanctuary.⁵ These titles were perhaps intended to regain Charles Emanuel's favour after a disagreement, for in 1603 he had intervened on behalf of the Observant Brothers, whom Archbishop Federico Borromeo of Milan and Bishop Bascapè had decided to expel from the Sacro Monte, a decision that the *vicinanza* actively supported. In a broader sense, Charles Emanuel's patronage of the Sacro Monte should be viewed not simply as demonstrations of religious zeal but also as part of a strategy to extend Savoyard political influence eastwards. The Val Sesia, on the border between the Savoyard domains and the Duchy of Milan, was the most accessible point for this penetration, which the House of Savoy conducted first through religious patronage, later by political and military action culminating in their acquisition of the Val Sesia in 1707.

Bishop Bascapè

Carlo Bascapè (1550–1615), who became bishop of Novara in 1593, set an indelible stamp on the development of the Sacro Monte of Varallo. He was in a very real way its second founder, a worthy successor to Bernardino Caimi. Modelling himself on his mentor Carlo Borromeo, he conducted periodic visitations through his diocese; in the course of these peregrinations he came to Varallo in 1593 and 1594, and then annually between 1602 and 1604. Each time he assessed the progress of the work on the sanctuary, conferred with the *fabbricieri*, and issued directives for the building and decoration of the chapels. His later instructions focused on reconfiguring the upper level of the sanctuary into a sequence of chapels recounting Christ's trials in Jerusalem. These were to be arranged around a space, the Piazza dei Tribunali as it came to be called, which superseded the project for a central piazza that Alessi had outlined in the *Libro dei Misteri*. In his instructions for the chapels and their imagery Bascapè followed the aesthetic principles laid down by Carlo Borromeo, but his concept of a chronological sequence of chapels betrayed a debt to the *Libro dei Misteri*. He also intensified the didactic element in the chapels by instructing the art-

⁵ Galloni, *Sacro Monte di Varallo*, pp. 237–38; Tonetti, *Storia della Vallesesia*, pp. 487–88; 'Indulgentia Plenaria Perptua. a [...] Sixto V Sacro Varalli Monte [...] in Assumptionis Virginis Mariae 1587', BRT MP, 3 (1), no. 12.

ists to insert panels and texts into their paintings, to explicate the message the chapel conveyed, and draw parallels between the Old and the New Testaments.⁶ This fundamental innovation became normal practice for the frescoed decoration in many of the later chapels. Bascapè's vigorous intervention established the layout of the sanctuary in the form it retains to the present day.

Bascapè was born in 1550 to a noble family at Melegnano, near Milan.⁷ His baptismal name was Giovanni Francesco; he would take the name Carlo when he entered the Barnabite order in 1578, in honour of his mentor, Carlo Borromeo. He received a good classical education (he was an excellent Latinist), graduated in law from the University of Pavia in 1574, and began to practice as an advocate in Milan. Here he was drawn into Carlo Borromeo's circle of confidants and decided to enter the religious life. In 1576 he was ordained priest, and two years later was admitted to the recently founded order of the Barnabites. By this time he had become one of Borromeo's closest collaborators in his efforts to reform the archdiocese of Milan. At Borromeo's request Bascapè conducted research into the life of Saint Ambrose, the fourth-century archbishop of Milan whom Borromeo especially venerated, as part of the project for decorating the choir of the cathedral in Milan with scenes from the saint's life. Bascapè drafted the resolutions of the archbishop's fourth provincial council in 1576, on the architectural and aesthetic principles for church design, which became the basis for the *Instructiones fabricae et suppellectilis ecclesiasticae* issued in 1577. In the course of his researches Bascapè acquired a knowledge of religious iconography which he would put into practice later at Varallo. Borromeo's Tridentine aesthetics became the principles guiding Bascapè's work on the Sacro Monte: straightforward storytelling, no recondite symbols, no hint of impropriety.⁸

In 1580 Borromeo sent Bascapè on a diplomatic mission to Philip II, in an unsuccessful attempt to settle the jurisdictional dispute with the Spanish crown that had arisen the year before over Borromeo's efforts to reform the archdiocese. On his return Bascapè rejoined the archbishop's inner circle, while at the same time assuming a series of high positions in the Barnabite order. He was one of the intimates who attended Borromeo's deathbed in 1584, and he wrote

⁶ Ohno, 'La visualizzazione della "Imitatio Christi"', pp. 68–69.

⁷ For his career, see Prodi, 'Bascapè, Carlo'; Longo, 'Studi e prospettive critiche sull'episcopato di Carlo Bascapè'; Tuniz, 'Nota critico-biografica su Carlo Bascapè vescovo di Novara'.

⁸ De Filippis, 'L'indirizzo e il controllo del Bascapè', pp. 296–300.

a description of the archbishop's passing which was widely reprinted and translated. In 1592 he published a biography of the archbishop (it had to be printed at Ingolstadt, to avoid controversy with the ecclesiastical authorities in Italy), in which he extolled Borromeo's intense spirituality and his wide-ranging religious and administrative reforms.⁹

A year after the biography appeared Bascapè was elevated to the see of Novara and immediately began to initiate reforms there. Following Borromeo's example, he reorganized the administrative structure of his diocese, dividing it into districts, each headed by a *vicario foraneo* directly responsible to him. He conducted visitations even in the remotest parts of his diocese, examining the local clergy and their parishioners, on the watch for any sign of the heresy or witchcraft so widespread in the mountainous areas.¹⁰ During these visitations he gathered a wealth of information on the population and the economy of his diocese, which he incorporated into his *Novaria*, the detailed description of the diocese he published in 1609.¹¹ He constantly strove to discipline the local clergy, who were often negligent and ignorant, in some instances violent and given to carrying firearms and consorting with criminals.¹² Prominent among these peccant clerics were the Observant Franciscans of Varallo.

Like Borromeo, Bascapè insisted on maintaining close control over all ecclesiastical construction and decoration in his diocese, and he paid special attention to the development of the Sacro Monte, as Sixtus V's brief of 1587 authorized him to do. His task was made easier by the willingness of the d'Adda family and the *fabbricieri* to accept his direction. After Giacomo d'Adda died in 1580 his sons assumed his role as chief patron of the Sacro Monte: first, Giovanni Antonio (1559–1603), elected as one of the *fabbricieri* in 1589, then Gerolamo Maria (1575–1631), who took over the position after his brother's death; he was followed by their nephew Giorgio (1635–1706).¹³ Giovanni Antonio, a pious devotee of the Sacro Monte, published a volume of meditations in which he enjoined pilgrims to approach the mysteries with proper reverence, and not

⁹ The work is Bascapè, *De vita et rebus gestis Caroli*. Cf. Turchini, *La fabbrica di un santo*, p. 32.

¹⁰ 'Editti', 15 June and 13 August 1596, in Bascapè, *Scritt publicatii*, pp. 471–74. Crenna, 'L'Inquisizione nel Novarese', describes a witch trial of 1609, which ended when the accused died in prison; Rizzi, *Storia della Valsesia*, p. 373, notes that there were fewer cases of witchcraft in the Val Sesia than in the Val d'Ossola.

¹¹ *Novaria seu de Ecclesia Novariensi libri duo*; Italian trans. by Ravizza, *La Novara sacra del vescovo venerabile Carlo Bascapè*.

¹² Chiesa, *Vita di Carlo Bascapè*, ed. by Pagano, pp. 409, 426.

¹³ Tonetti, *Le famiglie valesiane*, pp. 70–72.

as a source of diversion.¹⁴ With the support of the *fabbricieri* and the d'Adda family, Bascapè implemented his plans for the upper level of the Sacro Monte, to bring order to an area that until then lacked narrative coherence and artistic unity, as Alessi had observed thirty years earlier.

Bascapè enjoyed a close relationship with Federico Borromeo (1565–1631), a younger cousin of Carlo Borromeo, who became archbishop of Milan in 1595.¹⁵ Federico had lost his father at a very early age and was brought up by his pious mother, Margherita Trivulzio, under the close supervision of his cousin the archbishop, who became the dominant influence in his life. From the first Federico was groomed for high office in the Church. As a child he was devoted to his studies, and in 1579 was sent to the University of Bologna, to begin a humanistic education under the supervision of Gabriele Paleotti, the archbishop of Bologna and a close friend of Carlo Borromeo. After a year Federico, who now expressed a desire to enter the religious life, rejoined his cousin in Lombardy and was ordained priest. Carlo Borromeo then sent him to the University of Pavia, where he completed his degree in theology in 1585. Federico's family and the circle of intimates who had formerly surrounded Carlo Borromeo now took the necessary steps to advance his ecclesiastical career. He was dispatched to Rome and in December 1587 was elevated to the rank of cardinal. Rome offered a congenial atmosphere for the studious, highly cultured young man: in between his official duties he frequented the erudite and artistic circles there, pursuing the study of Christian and classical antiquities, art and literature, and frequenting the Oratory of Filippo Neri. In April 1595 Pope Clement VIII nominated him to the vacant archdiocese of Milan. At first, Federico was reluctant to accept, for he preferred study and contemplation to the active life of a high-ranking Church official, but eventually he set aside his scruples. He was consecrated two months later, and he made his formal entry into Milan on 11 June 1595.

Federico Borromeo's tenure as archbishop differed markedly from that of his cousin Carlo: he was less forceful by temperament, more willing to compromise, and deeply devoted to his studies and to the arts. As archbishop he was faced by a welter of problems, religious, administrative, and political. He found that elements of the clergy were corrupt and insubordinate, having benefited from the relaxed governance of Carlo Borromeo's successor. They resisted

¹⁴ Göttler, 'The Temptation of the Senses', p. 440; he wrote his *Meditationi sui Misteri del Sacro Monte* (1606) at the suggestion of Bascapè; Cometti, 'La committenza della famiglia D'Adda', p. 293.

¹⁵ For his biography, see Prodi, 'Borromeo, Federico'.

Federico's efforts to impose discipline and higher intellectual and moral standards on them. The most immediate problem facing him, however, was the longstanding jurisdictional dispute with the Spanish governor of Milan, which Carlo Borromeo had been unable to resolve. In an effort to achieve a settlement, the pope evoked the dispute to Rome, and Federico Borromeo spent the years from 1597 to 1601 there, far from his archdiocese, involved in complex negotiations. He returned to Milan in 1601, but the dispute dragged on and was not settled until 1615. During the early phase of these negotiations Bascapè acted as Federico's adviser, and after Federico's return to Milan, the two men remained closely linked. Federico naturally assigned Bascapè, the companion and biographer of Carlo Borromeo, a leading role in the negotiations with the papacy that led to his canonization in 1610.¹⁶

Federico Borromeo differed from his ascetic cousin in his attitude to the arts.¹⁷ For Carlo Borromeo, buildings and images were instruments for stimulating and guiding devotion, whereas for the humanistically inclined Federico the arts were to be appreciated not just for their religious meaning and function but also for their intrinsic beauty. During his time in Rome he had befriended a number of artists, including Federico Zuccaro, Paul Brill, and Jan Brueghel the Elder. While in Rome he commissioned Caravaggio to paint the still-life *Basket of Fruit*, which he brought back to Milan. He collected paintings and sculpture, and was also an avid student of history and literature. In 1609 he founded the Biblioteca Ambrosiana at Milan, which he stocked with the vast collection of books and manuscripts he had accumulated, for the use of the college of scholars he established there. In 1618 he founded the picture gallery or Pinacoteca at Milan, to which he donated his own art collection, and for which he wrote a descriptive catalogue, *Museum Bibliothecae Ambrosianae* (1625). A year earlier he had written a treatise on religious painting, *De pictura sacra*. This he may have intended as a manual for the Accademia Ambrosiana he had established in 1620 to train painters, modelled on the Academy of Saint Luke at Rome, which he had helped to found in 1593. The rules for his new academy were strict. Training was directed primarily at producing artists who would follow rigorous moral principles in representing their subjects *honestamente* — 'decently' — along the lines laid down by the Council of Trent.¹⁸

¹⁶ Turchini, *La fabbrica di un santo*, chap. 1; Chiesa, *Vita di Carlo Bascapè*, ed. by Pagano, pp. 537–49; Rasmussen, 'Liturgy and Iconography'.

¹⁷ For the difference in character and methods of ecclesiastical governance between Carlo and Federico Borromeo, see De Boer, *The Conquest of the Soul*, chap. 4.

¹⁸ Guenzati, *Vita di Federigo Borromeo*, ed. by Bonomelli, pp. 183–220; see Jones's intro-

The Expulsion of the Observant Franciscans

Bascapè's close relationship with Federico Borromeo would be of critical importance to him in dealing with the unruly Observant Franciscans of Varallo. In 1589, under his predecessor Bishop Bossi, the dispute over the election of the *fabbricieri* had flared up anew. Following his own interpretation of Sixtus V's brief, the guardian of Santa Maria delle Grazie chose six nominees who were not full citizens of Varallo but merely dwellers in the town. The *vicinanza* protested that these men were ineligible because, according to their reading of the brief, only full citizens of Varallo could hold the office of *fabbriciere*. Seeing that the Observants were trying to break the control of the urban elite over the Sacro Monte, the *vicinanza* responded with an unequivocal statement of their privileges. The Observants then appealed to Rome. The dispute was settled in 1602; Bascapè sided with the *vicinanza* and decreed that its members alone were eligible to become *fabbricieri*.¹⁹

Bascapè's lack of sympathy for the Observant Brothers was reinforced by his longstanding annoyance at their misdeeds and machinations. They exemplified the corrupt clerical type he was determined to purge from his diocese. The Observants had acquired an unsavoury reputation for loose living and criminal activities. The *vicinanza* and Bascapè's predecessors had censured them, to no avail: they did not change their ways. In 1600 Bascapè decided to be rid of them and began quietly collecting information from the citizens of Varallo, who disliked them for their corruption and inattention to their spiritual duties. By the end of the year he had secured the pope's consent to remove them. In July 1601 he wrote to a colleague:

I know well the scandals these Brothers have caused many times, over forbidden firearms, through dishonesty, and other things, which is disgraceful. They have again caused a golden chalice to disappear from the Sacro Monte [...] and they speak badly of me whenever they wish.²⁰

He had resolved to expel them: the only question now was which order would replace them. The Jesuits and the Barnabites — Bascapè's own order — were

duction to *Federico Borromeo and the Ambrosiana*; Borromeo, *Sacred Painting*; Jones, 'Art's Role in Personal Reform'.

¹⁹ 'Ordinatio' by Bascapè, 28 January 1602, BRT MP, C 36 31, no. 5; Tonetti, *Storia della Vallesesia*, pp. 484–85.

²⁰ Bascapè to the archpriest of Milan cathedral, 28 July 1601, in Chiesa, *Vita di Carlo Bascapè*, ed. by Pagano, p. 506; Fassola, *La Nuova Gierusalemme*, pp. 39–40.

considered but were rejected in favour of the Reformed Observant Franciscans, because only a mendicant order was permitted to officiate at the Sacro Monte.²¹

This dramatic turn of events provoked a flurry of reactions. Duke Charles Emanuel of Savoy sprang to the defence of the Observant Brothers, as did the Senate of Milan, perhaps as a way to contest Bascapè's authority — at this time he was advising Federico Borromeo in his jurisdictional dispute with the Spanish crown, in which the Senate was upholding the rights of the crown. But Bascapè was in a strong position. He had secured the backing of the d'Adda family and the *vicinanza* of Varallo, of Pope Clement VIII, and Archbishop Federico Borromeo.²² By the middle of 1602 preparations for the transfer of the Sacro Monte to the Reformed Observants were under way. To remove one of the obstacles to the transfer, the pope authorized them to keep any organs already installed in the churches they were to occupy, even though this was contrary to their rule.²³ The Observant Brothers, meanwhile, were uttering dire threats against them in the hope of dissuading them from taking over the monastery and the Sacro Monte. Alarmed, the Reformed Observants asked to be released from the arrangement, but Bascapè refused. The transfer was to proceed as planned.²⁴

On 15 May 1603 Clement VIII instructed Archbishop Federico Borromeo to 'reform the monastery of Santa Maria delle Grazie and the Sacro Monte of Varallo': he was to remove the Observant Franciscans 'on account of their bad mode of life and their maladministration', investigate their misdeeds, punish those responsible, and install the Reformed Observants in their place. In August 1603 Borromeo and Bascapè travelled to Varallo to supervise the transfer.²⁵ They were obliged to listen to yet another round of recrimina-

²¹ Bascapè to Vicario of Varallo, 25 January 1603, in Chiesa, *Vita di Carlo Bascapè*, ed. by Pagano, p. 506. The Reformed Observant Franciscans, *Ordo Fratrum Minorum Reformatorum*, originated as a stricter offshoot of the Observants in 1518 and were recognized as a separate branch of the Franciscans in 1532. They are distinct from the other reformed branch of the Observants, the Capuchins, founded in 1528 and recognized as a separate order in 1619. (I misidentified the Reformed Observants as Capuchins in 'The Vicinanza and the Sacro Monte of Varallo'.)

²² Longo, 'Sacri Monti e devozione', pp. 78–80; Chiara, *Storia*, fols 29–35.

²³ 'Concessio', 18 June 1602, BRT MP, 3 (1), no. 14.

²⁴ Chiesa, *Vita di Carlo Bascapè*, ed. by Pagano, p. 506.

²⁵ 'Delegatio [...] Clem. P. P. VIII. Ad Eminentiss. Cardinalem Federicum Borromeum', 15 May 1603, BRT MP, 3 (1), no. 15; 'Visita pastorale', August 1603, Milan, Archivio Storico Diocesano di Milano, Archivio Spirituale, (henceforth ASDM AS), Sez. X, Extraprovinciali, Visita Pastorale e Documenti Aggiunti, II, fols 1–11.

tions between the *fabbricieri* and the departing Observant Brothers over the pilgrims' offerings and the inventories of buildings and sacramental vessels, books, and papers. These matters were eventually settled, and the Observants departed. But they did not go quietly. Contrary to the terms of the settlement, they despoiled the monastery and absconded with its library. Borromeo had to order them to return the books. Nor did things end there. The Observants made a last-ditch appeal to the pope, demanding that Bascapè be stripped of his authority over the Sacro Monte. The pope rejected their appeal, and they were gone for good.²⁶

The Reformed Observants took their place. On 15 December 1603, under the porch of Santa Maria delle Grazie, the decree of Clement VIII granting possession of the Sacro Monte and the monastery to them was read out in the presence of the *fabbricieri* and the syndics of Varallo, who handed over the premises to the new guardian of the monastery in a ceremony recalling the original grant to Caimi in 1493. Fassola records that the *vicinanza* and people of Varallo welcomed the Reformed Observant Brothers, hoping that the conflicts that had plagued the Sacro Monte were now a thing of the past.²⁷

Like the citizens of Varallo, Bishop Bascapè hoped that the departure of the Observant Brothers would usher in a new reign of harmony between the Vicinanza and the Brothers of Santa Maria delle Grazie. But the arrival of the Reformed Observants did not alter the fundamental divergence of interests between the two authorities that jointly governed the Sacro Monte. Almost at once the bickering started up again, and familiar accusations began to be exchanged. In an attempt to put an end to this unseemly discord, which he said was the work of the devil, Federico Borromeo decreed a comprehensive settlement binding both parties.²⁸ His decree reaffirmed Sixtus V's Brief of 1587: it restated verbatim the rules for electing the *fabbricieri*; ordered that there were to be separate collection boxes for the upkeep of the buildings and for the celebration of masses, each with two sets of keys, one for the *fabbricieri* and one for the guardian of the monastery; reaffirmed that the bishop of Novara was to determine the form of the 'oratories, images and mysteries of the Passion of Our

²⁶ 'Decreta [...] Federici Cardin. Borromei [...]', 7 March 1605, BRT MP, 3 (1), no. 17; Bascapè to Canon Camassini, 29 December 1603, Chiesa, *Vita di Carlo Bascapè*, ed. by Pagano, p. 506.

²⁷ 'Instrumentum Possessionis [...]', 13 December 1603, BRT MP, 3 (1), no. 16; Fassola, *La Nuova Gierusalemme*, p. 41.

²⁸ 'Decreta [...] Federici. Cardin. Borromei [...]', 7 March 1605, BRT MP, C 36 31, no. 4. (This version of the decree differs in detail from the one in BRT MP, 3 (1), no. 17, cited in n. 26.)

Lord Jesus Christ, which are to be made accurately in accordance with evangelical history'. The bishop's authority over the Sacro Monte was final and could not be appealed; the *fabbricieri* could not alter any images or chapels without his permission, on pain of excommunication. But this settlement would prove no more effective than all the earlier ones. The same disputes over the same issues would drag on for as long as the Reformed Observant Brothers remained at the Sacro Monte.

Bascapè and the Artistic Development of the Sacro Monte

From the very start of his episcopate, Carlo Bascapè asserted his control over the development of the Sacro Monte, closely supervising the planning, building, and decoration of the sanctuary according to Carlo Borromeo's *Instructiones*.²⁹ In September 1593 during his first visitation at Varallo, he ordered that certain chapels were to be altered to make them historically accurate, that several new ones were to be built, and that the chapels on the upper level were to be arranged to comply with the biblical accounts. His intention was clear: the Sacro Monte was to become a morally uplifting *historia sacra*.

On his second visitation in 1594 he left lengthy, detailed instructions for modifying many of the chapels and for building four new ones.³⁰ He ordered the *fabbricieri* to employ only 'mastri eccellenti' and to replace inferior work by previous artists. Some of the chapels built by Giacomo d'Adda needed to be improved: the faces of some of the figures were to be made more expressive; the figure of the woman of Samaria at the well was too 'lascivious'; the faces of the bystanders at the raising of Lazarus must better convey their amazement. The son of the widow of Naim, whom Christ was resuscitating, should be dressed in the ancient manner, to be historically accurate; the floor of the chapel of the Flight into Egypt must be made to look like the desert. Figures must be added to the chapel of the Innocents, to increase the horror of the scene, and to the chapel of the Entry into Jerusalem, to make it more joyous. Bascapè demanded the highest degree of realism, to make the scene in each chapel immediately intelligible. Individual figures should be easily recognizable as the persons or

²⁹ Borlandelli, 'Lo spazio sacro', pp. 275–79; Gentile, 'Gli interventi di Carlo Bascapè'; De Filippis, 'Alcuni episodi', lists his artistic commissions.

³⁰ 'Decreti', 24 September 1593, 25 September 1594, ASDM AS, Sez. X, Extraprovinciali, II, fols 70^r–74^r; Galloni, *Sacro Monte di Varallo*, pp. 253, 276–77; Gentile, 'Note per una lettura', p. 89. Joseph's First Dream (no. 4) was the only chapel actually built; the Purification, Jesus and the Doctors, and the Marriage at Cana were not.

types they portrayed; a personage reappearing in successive chapels should be depicted as the same physical type and with the same costume, for continuity; the order of the chapels should precisely follow the scriptural accounts. Literal realism and historical accuracy would guarantee the truth of the miraculous story the Sacro Monte was recounting.³¹

On a more mundane note, Bascapè's orders for the Sacro Monte reveal meticulous attention to matters of housekeeping. Rubbish must be cleared away, pictures and images kept clean, graffiti expunged. Notices forbidding defacement were to be posted outside each chapel.³² Gratings were to be placed in front of Gaudenzio's figures to protect them from vandals: there are no graffiti on the walls of the chapel after this time. The vestibules of the chapels should be neither too wide nor too narrow, lest they provide lurking-places for the ill-intentioned. Food and wine were forbidden within the sacred area, so an inn was to be built just outside the entrance, where pilgrims could rest and refresh themselves. (It still stands today, and in September 1887 it was where the local notables held the banquet to honour Samuel Butler.)³³ A shop was soon added to the inn, selling crowns and medallions to the pilgrims. It evidently did brisk business, for in 1610 the inn and shop were leased for the substantial sum of 600 *lire* per year.³⁴ In 1604 Bascapè ordered that the gates of the sanctuary were to be locked at night, and a watchman appointed to keep guard. Animals were not to be pastured within the walls. A house that stood on the top of the hill was to be demolished, so that no mundane habitation would detract from the sacral quality of the place.³⁵ Serenity and order must reign, so that the pilgrims would perceive the New Jerusalem, enclosed within its walls, as an oasis of sanctity, a blessed enclave of serenity far removed from the harsh world below.

As part of his instructions for the Sacro Monte, in 1594 Bascapè ordered the sculptor Michele Prestinari to add more figures, including one of King

³¹ This evidently follows cap. XVII of Borromeo's *Instructiones*; see Barocchi, *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento*, III, 42; Voelker, 'Borromeo's Influence on Sacred Art and Architecture', p. 176, calls this clause 'a veritable manifesto against artistic license'.

³² Cf. Decree imposing fines for defacing the chapels, 26 September 1594, Bascapè, *Scritti pubblicati*, p. 664.

³³ Durio, *Samuele Butler*, p. 15.

³⁴ Fassola, *La Valle Sesia descritta*, IV, pt 7, p. 118.

³⁵ 'Ordini dati per le cappelle', 5 October 1602, ASDM AS, Sez. X, Extraprovinciali, II, fols 65–66; 'Ordini', 27 September 1604, Archivio Diocesano di Novara (hereafter ADN), Visite Pastorali, CCLXXXV, fol. 22. (The house, Casa Valgrana, was not demolished and still stands today.)



Figure 5.1. Chapel of the Massacre of the Innocents, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Detail.
Photo by the author, courtesy of the Ente di Gestione dei Sacri Monti, Varallo.

Herod, to the chapel of the Massacre of the Innocents, which at that time contained only a few figures. Bascapè's directive radically altered the composition of the chapel: the spectacle of savagery now filled the entire space, watched by the impassive figure of King Herod. These changes greatly enhanced its impact. In its scale and composition, and its graphic realism, the chapel of the Innocents marks a return to the manner of Gaudenzio's Crucifixion. But unlike Gaudenzio's masterpiece, it had no doorway allowing pilgrims to enter and mingle with the figures: it was designed as a theatre to be viewed frontally, from a distance, as if through a proscenium.³⁶ The separation of the tableaux of figures in the chapels from the audience was now complete.

The Innocents chapel contains more than ninety figures engaged in furious action. In the centre, seated on his throne, King Herod watches his soldiers seize babies and hack them to death while their agonized mothers try vainly to protect them. This horrifically realistic scene produces a profound psychological impact. The pilgrims would have identified with the awful fate of the terrified

³⁶ It bears no resemblance to Alessi's design, which was for an octagonal chapel with a circular interior: Alessi, *Libro dei Misteri*, ed. by Stefani Perrone, I, fols 28–32.

mothers and their butchered children. And the chapel's fresco background adds to the dramatic effect. It represents an important innovation compared to Gaudenzio's Crucifixion chapel and the chapels constructed over the preceding decades. The Milanese painters Gian Mauro (1565–1640) and Giovanni Battista della Rovere (1561–before 1633), nicknamed 'I Fiamminghini', designed the chapel in formal perspective as a stage-set of columns and arches framing the action depicted by the figures.³⁷ This creates a ferocious tension: the serenity of the palatial interior, grandly vaulted, contrasts violently with the ghastly scene unfolding within it. Because of its scale, its great crowd of figures, its pitiless realism, and its dramatic composition, the Innocents chapel both looks back to Gaudenzio's Crucifixion, and forward to the most important chapels constructed in the seventeenth century, with their massed figures and perspectival settings.

In 1597 Bascapè ordered that the chapel of the Nailing to the Cross, recently commissioned by the marchioness of Masserano, was to be redesignated as the Ascent to Calvary. In April 1599 the *fabbricieri* awarded the contract for the figures in this chapel to Jean de Wespín, or Tabaguet, italianized as 'Il Tabacchetti' (c. 1568–1615). He is the main exception to the general rule that the artists who worked at Varallo, generation after generation, were from the region: from the Val Sesia or from Lombardy. He was born into a family of merchants, the Wespín, at Dinant in Belgium. His grandfather had earned the sobriquet 'Tabaguet' apparently because of his connection to the tobacco trade, then taking off in the region. The young Jean Wespín, or Tabaguet, probably trained as a sculptor in wood and stone, but not as a modeller of terracotta, either in his native city or in Namur. In 1587–88 he left Dinant, apparently to escape his brutal stepfather, and migrated to Italy, where he would remain for the rest of his life.³⁸

Success came quickly. In 1594 we find Tabacchetti at the Sacro Monte, reworking the figures in the chapel of the Fall, alongside Michele Prestinari. Like the Observant Franciscans, Bascapè considered the naked figures of Adam and Eve unfit for the eyes of pious pilgrims because they contravened the Tridentine principles of 'decorum' and 'decency'. Decorum meant the avoidance of disorderly, extravagant modes of representation, while decency — *bon-està* — required that images should not betray any hint of 'lasciviousness'. Here

³⁷ De Filippis, *Guida*, p. 61; Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, pp. 90–92; Stefani Perrone, 'Varallo', pp. 152–54; Caviglioli, 'Della Rovere, Mauro' and 'Della Rovere, Giovanni Battista'.

³⁸ Devigne, 'Les frères Jean, Guillaume et Nicolas de Wespín', p. 113.

Bascapè may well have echoed the views of Gabriele Paleotti, archbishop of Bologna, author of a celebrated post-Tridentine treatise on art, and a close friend of Carlo Borromeo.³⁹ So Prestinari and Tabacchetti were instructed to model two new figures, still naked, but less suggestive than the originals. (These too were eventually deemed unsuitable and were removed from the chapel, clothed, and reused in the chapel of the Taking of Christ.) As a further precaution, to cloak their nakedness Bascapè ordered a screen of animals, trees, and bushes to be interposed in front of them.⁴⁰ Counter-Reformation puritanism was effacing the humanistic vision of Alessi and Giacomo d'Adda. These changes took time: in October 1602 and again in September 1604, Bascapè was still ordering that 'for greater decency some kind of tree must be placed between the statue of Eve and the [viewers'] grating, to conceal more of her nakedness'. In addition, he ordered a figure of God the Father to be suspended above the two figures, poised to punish their transgression.⁴¹

Tabacchetti's next task was to model the statues for the chapel of the Ascent to Calvary, his masterpiece. In the existing chapel the two scenes of the Temptation of Christ and the Ascent to Calvary were juxtaposed; this did not fit Bascapè's requirement that the chapels follow in their historical sequence.⁴² In June 1597 he gave precise orders for the decoration of the new chapel: the sacrifice of Isaac, anticipating the sacrifice of Christ, was to be depicted in a panel on the wall. In 1602 Bascapè ordered the insertion of two more panels: one of Abimelech and his men cutting wood at the siege of Sichem, the other depicting the spies returning from the Promised Land with a bunch of grapes. Ten prophetic texts inscribed on flowing ribbons linked the panels. Like the previous panel depicting the sacrifice of Isaac, these images prefigured the Crucifixion but in different, and rather abstruse, ways. Together, the images and the texts constituted an exhortation to follow and imitate Christ. The grapes prefigured Christ as 'the true vine', a meaning spelled out in its adjoining text. The wood that Abimelech and his men were cutting represented the wood of the cross, but with another, deeper meaning: if the bad king Abimelech's men

³⁹ Gaston, 'How Words Control Images. The Rhetoric of Decorum in Counter-Reformation Italy', pp. 82–85.

⁴⁰ De Filippis, *Guida*, p. 37. Alessi's original drawing for the interior of the chapel shows the two figures completely naked, unobscured by vegetation: Alessi, *Libro dei Misteri*, ed. by Stefani Perrone, I, fol. 17. (See Figure 4. 16).

⁴¹ 'Altri Ordini', 5 Oct. 1602, ASDM AS, Sez. X, Extraprovinciali, II, fol. 65.

⁴² Ohno, p. 71. This chapel was located next to the original entrance to the Sacro Monte.

could obey him in an unjust action — the destruction of the innocent people of Sichem — so much the more should the pilgrims obey Christ's every word.⁴³

Bascapè's instruction to insert these images and biblical texts raises the question: how would the largely illiterate and untutored audience of pilgrims be able to understand them? The well-known story of Abraham's attempt to sacrifice Isaac might have been comprehensible to pilgrims with a basic knowledge of scripture, but the recondite allusions to Abimelech and the spies with their grapes, or the biblical texts, could hardly have been intelligible to them. Bascapè knew that the pilgrims would be accompanied by guides — their parish priests, or an Observant Brother — who would explicate these arcane references for them. Bascapè's innovation became common practice. From this time, panels depicting biblical parallels and prefigurations would appear in a number of the later chapels on the Sacro Monte.

To aid the pilgrims in their contemplation of the imagery on the Sacro Monte, Bascapè commissioned a new guide-book, the *Brevi Considerationi sopra i Misteri del Sacro Monte di Varallo*, by Canon Giovanni Giacomo Ferrari. It was published in 1612.⁴⁴ A verse at the beginning of the book tells the pilgrims that the journey to the substitute Holy Mountain of Varallo is as spiritually beneficial as the journey to Jerusalem itself. The guide-book then describes the chapels (then totalling fifty) in sequential order, enjoining the pilgrims to 'consider' the mystery in each chapel and absorb its message. The book is not an accurate record of the chapels as they existed: it includes some that were not yet built (the Nailing to the Cross, the Deposition), and some that would never be built (the Supper at Emmaus, the Descent of the Holy Spirit, the Last Judgement, among others). It describes the Ascent to Calvary as occupying two chapels (nos 36 and 37), and the woodcuts illustrating it bear no resemblance to the chapel as Tabacchetti and the painter Morazzone had just executed it. In Ferrari's description of the first chapel (no. 36) Christ bends under the weight of the Cross: in the second Simon of Cyrene is compelled to aid him. The commentary exhorts the pilgrims to follow Christ's example and willingly carry the crosses that their daily life lays upon them. Ferrari's text alludes to the sacrifice of Isaac, but nowhere does he mention images of Abimelech or the spies returning from the Promised Land. It provides what seems to be the current state of Bascapè's master-plan for the Sacro Monte, but differing in detail and not fully up to date.

⁴³ Ohno, pp. 72–77, lists the biblical texts.

⁴⁴ Gio. Giacomo Ferrari, *Brevi Considerationi sopra i Misteri del Sacro Monte di Varallo*. Another edition was published at Varallo in 1642 by Marco Ravelli.



Figure 5.2. Chapel of the Ascent to the Cross, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Onlookers and Panel depicting Abimelech. Photo by the author, courtesy of the Ente di Gestione dei Sacri Monte, Varallo.

Bascapè originally instructed the *fabbricieri* that Saint Veronica was to appear in the chapel of the Ascent to Calvary, with her kerchief bearing the imprint of Christ's face, but that Simon of Cyrene, Saint John, the Virgin, Mary Magdalene, and the two thieves were to be replaced by a crowd of spectators. His intention was perhaps to repeat the powerful effect of the massed figures in the chapel of the Innocents, or in Gaudenzio's Crucifixion. In a remarkably short space of time, between 1599 and 1602, Tabacchetti modelled forty-eight figures for the chapel: Christ and Veronica, the holy women, the frenzied mob, and the escort of horsemen. The crowd includes one of the most memorable figures in the entire Sacro Monte: the man with an enormous goitre raising a rod to beat Christ as he staggers under the weight of the Cross. This figure closely resembles the man proffering the sponge to Christ's lips in the Crucifixion chapel: Tabacchetti was evidently following Bascapè's instructions to make the figures in this chapel resemble those in the Crucifixion chapel, which at that time was positioned directly after it.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ The chapel of the Nailing of Christ to the Cross was later interposed between the Ascent to Calvary and the Crucifixion.



Figure 5.3. Chapel of the Ascent to the Cross, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Detail: Christ and Veronica. Photo by the author, courtesy of the Ente di Gestione dei Sacri Monti, Varallo.

At some point, however, Bascapè must have modified his original instructions. In the chapel as Tabacchetti completed it Veronica duly makes her appearance with her miraculous kerchief, but the figures Bascapè had banished — the two thieves, Simon of Cyrene, the Virgin, Mary Magdalene, and Saint John — all reappear.⁴⁶ The effect of the swarming mass of figures around Christ and Veronica, the range of physical types portrayed, and the variety of their facial expressions, is overwhelming. Butler contended with polemical gusto that Tabacchetti's figures in this chapel were superior to those in Michelangelo's Medici chapel.⁴⁷

In August 1602, once Tabacchetti had arranged his figures in the chapel of the Ascent to Calvary, the *fabbricieri* awarded the commission for painting the frescoes to Pier Francesco Mazzucchelli (1573–c. 1626), known as 'Il Morazzone' from his birthplace near Varese.⁴⁸ His family had moved to Rome

⁴⁶ Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, pp. 166–69.

⁴⁷ Butler, *Ex Voto*, p. 62.

⁴⁸ The principal study is Stoppa, *Pier Francesco Mazzucchelli detto Il Morazzone*; see also Serafini 'Mazzucchelli, Pier Francesco, detto il Morazzone'.

during his childhood, and he received his artistic training in the studio of the late mannerist painter Giuseppe Cesari, the 'Cavaliere d'Arpino', who ran the most important artistic workshop in the city at that time. Caravaggio had worked in the Cavaliere's studio for a brief period, and Morazzone would probably have encountered some of his early paintings before he returned to Varese in 1598. In Lombardy his reputation grew rapidly as a painter of large-scale works. In 1602 he was commissioned, along with two leading Milanese artists, Giulio Cesare Procaccini and Giovanni Battista Crespi, 'Il Cerano', to paint a series of panels depicting the life of Carlo Borromeo, to hang in the cathedral of Milan. Morazzone's commission to paint the chapel of the Ascent to Calvary — awarded at almost the same moment — marked the beginning of his association with the Sacro Monte. In this chapel he composed a mass of figures that, following Bascapè's injunctions, imitated Gaudenzio's frescoes in the Crucifixion chapel and complemented the frenetic action of Tabacchetti's statues. On the walls of the chapel, as Bascapè ordered, he painted the three panels depicting the precursors of Christ's sacrifice and the ribbons of biblical texts.⁴⁹

The chapel of the Ascent to Calvary was Tabacchetti's last work at Varallo. He moved to Costigliole d'Asti in Monferrato, where he married a local woman, raised a family, and prospered by accumulating landed property. He spent the rest of his life working at the recently founded Sacro Monte of Crea, aided by his younger brother Nicola, who had come from Dinant to join him in Italy. Tabacchetti's crowning achievement at Crea is the ascending orders of the angelic host in the dome of the chapel of the Assumption of the Virgin, the 'Paradiso', at the summit of the sanctuary.

Pilate's Palace

At first Bascapè had not issued instructions for the upper level of the Sacro Monte, merely noting that its chapels were not disposed in any coherent order. But following his visitation in October 1602, he drafted a comprehensive plan for the upper area.⁵⁰ The sequence of chapels was to adhere strictly to scripture: it would start with the Last Supper and proceed to Christ's trials before the High Priests Annas and Caiaphas, King Herod, and the Roman governor,

⁴⁹ The contract was signed on 28 August 1602, Stoppa, *Pier Francesco Mazzucchelli detto Il Morazzone*, pp. 177–79, 287; cf. Stefani Perrone, 'Varallo', p. 171. The frescoes were paid for in part by Contessa Salomoni di Serravalle Sesia. For Tabacchetti's later career at Crea, see Bava, 'Pittori e scultori', pp. 108–13.

⁵⁰ Galloni *Sacro Monte di Varallo*, pp. 269–71; Langé and Pensa, *Sacro Monte*, pp. 11–14, 37.



Figure 5.4. Piazza dei Tribunali, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Tribunals of Herod and Caiaphas.
Photo by the author, courtesy of the Ente di Gestione dei Sacri Monti, Varallo.



Figure 5.5. Palace of Pilate, Sacro Monte of Varallo.
Photo by the author, courtesy of the Ente di Gestione dei Sacri Monti, Varallo.

Pontius Pilate. The chapels representing the palaces of the two High Priests and Herod, and the multi-roomed palace of Pilate (containing chapels nos 23–35) were to be built around an open area that became known as the Piazza dei Tribunali. The imposing mass of Pilate's palace was intended to replicate the Roman governor's mansion in Jerusalem, from which the Via Dolorosa led to Calvary. It was to occupy the southern side of the piazza, with the palaces of Herod and the two High Priests forming the other three sides. Bascapè ordered that the existing chapels in this area, which were not in chronological order, were to be moved or repurposed. From the last chapel in Pilate's Palace, the Condemnation of Christ (no. 35), the sequence of chapels would pick up again with the recently completed Ascent to Calvary, then proceed to the Crucifixion and Deposition, the Pietà, the Sepulchre, and finally to the Fountain of the Risen Christ.

In September 1604 Bascapè added further details to his instructions.⁵¹ He wanted a statue of Carlo Borromeo to be placed in the new chapel of Christ Praying in the Garden of Gethsemane (no. 21) to commemorate Borromeo's last visit to the Sacro Monte, during which he had spent long hours in contemplation at this chapel. For this statue the artists were to use 'the best likeness of him that can be found'. But Bascapè's order was not carried out. Instead, Borromeo was portrayed in a painting on the wall of the chapel; a statue was finally installed in 1778.⁵²

Pilate's Palace, the centrepiece of the Piazza dei Tribunali, was to be a large two-storey building containing eight chapels depicting Christ's trials from his first appearance before Pilate (no. 27) to his final condemnation (nos 29 to 35). Bascapè also ordered the construction of a stairway, the Scala Santa, to link the chapels on the two levels of the building. The original Scala Santa was the staircase leading to Pilate's Palace in Jerusalem that Christ ascended and descended twice in the course of his trial. The empress Helena supposedly discovered it and had it transported to Rome, where it became the focus of a devotional cult. In 1589 Sixtus V moved it from its original location in the papal palace of the Lateran to a special building nearby, the Sanctum Sanctorum, designed by Domenico Fontana. Bascapè intended to incorporate a replica of the Scala Santa into his plan for Pilate's Palace, both in the interests of historical verisimilitude and to stimulate popular devotion. In his orders in 1604 he stated that the Scala

⁵¹ Order by Bascapè, 27 September 1604, ADN, Visite Pastorali, CCLXXXV, fol. 21.

⁵² De Filippis, *Guida*, p. 85. The statue is no longer in the chapel, which now houses only Christ and an angel.



Figure 5.6.
The Scala Santa, Sacro Monte
of Varallo. Photo by the author,
courtesy of the Ente di Gestione
dei Sacri Monti, Varallo.

Santa at Varallo was designed ‘for devout people who will wish to ascend it on their knees, in imitation of the Scala Santa in Rome’. And in order to make it as accurate a replica as possible, he instructed the *fabbricieri* to obtain precise information on its dimensions from a Valsesian living in Rome.⁵³ Bascapè intended that the construction of the Scala Santa should involve the entire population of the Val Sesia. A different local community was to pay for each of its twenty-eight steps, demonstrating that the Sacro Monte was not the sole property of the Vicini of Varallo, but of the whole valley. It was completed in 1627.

⁵³ Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, p. 148. The Valsesian colony at Rome was actively involved in the development of the Sacro Monte; in the 1570s they paid for the chapel of Jesus and the Samaritan Woman at the Well (no. 14), and in the eighteenth century they funded the construction of the palace of the High Priest Annas (no. 24) in the Piazza dei Tribunali.

The project for Pilate's Palace, with the Scala Santa as its central element, completed Bascapè's master plan for the Piazza dei Tribunali. Pilate's Palace was ready for the installation of its first figures by about 1606; the palaces of Caiaphas and Herod were built a few years later, but remained some years without their decoration. Their completion was delayed by plague, war, and economic recession, but in the later seventeenth century these two chapels were decorated and furnished with their figures. The palace of the High Priest Annas, however, was not built until the middle of the next century. The sequence of chapels around the Piazza dei Tribunali completed the evolution of the Sacro Monte into a didactic narrative, geared to the needs of Counter-Reformation spirituality. It was far removed from Caimi's topographical evocation of the Holy Places: narrative had effaced topomimesis.

The Era of the D'Enrico Brothers

Chief among the artists who worked on the chapels in Pilate's Palace and the Piazza dei Tribunali were the members of the d'Enrico family. They came from Alagna at the upper end of the Val Sesia, the numerous progeny of the patriarch Giovanni d'Enrico 'il Vecchio' (who died before 1586).⁵⁴ Their leader was Giovanni (c. 1559–1644), architect and sculptor in terracotta. Working with him were his brothers: the painters Melchiorre il Vecchio (1570/75–c. 1640) and Antonio, better known as Tanzio da Varallo (1575–1633); an elder brother, the master-mason (*capomastro*) Enrico (or Ulrico), who worked with Giovanni and another brother, Giacomo, at the Sacro Monte in the 1580s, then at Valduggia; and the latter's son, the painter Melchiorre il Giovane.⁵⁵ The d'Enrico family would dominate the artistic development of the Sacro Monte until Giovanni's departure from Varallo in 1642.

We do not know how the d'Enrico brothers first developed their artistic talents, but they would probably have trained in the family workshop. We know that Melchiorre il Vecchio and Tanzio went to Rome in 1600. Melchiorre stayed there for several years; Tanzio stayed longer and then spent several years in Naples and southern Italy. We do not know if any of the others left the Val Sesia in search of further training. By the time Giovanni and his brothers Giacomo and Enrico started working on the chapel of the Innocents in 1586, their first

⁵⁴ Debiaggi, *Dizionario degli artisti valsesiani*, p. 49, states that he was a smith and worker in wrought iron ('fabbro-ferraio').

⁵⁵ Romano, 'D'Enrico, famiglia'.

commission at the Sacro Monte, they were already accomplished practitioners of their crafts. There they worked under more experienced artists, the terracotta modellers Michele Prestinari, Michelangelo Rossetti, and Giacomo Bargnola, and the painters Gian Mauro and Giovanni Battista della Rovere.

When Bascapè came to inspect the Sacro Monte for the first time in 1593, he brought as his artistic adviser the painter Domenico di Orazio Alfani, from a family of artists originating in Perugia.⁵⁶ When Alfani left Varallo in 1602, Bascapè chose Giovanni d'Enrico to succeed him as director of the work on the Sacro Monte. By then Giovanni had executed his first independent commission, for figures in two chapels under construction, Christ Praying in the Garden of Gethsemane and Christ Waking the Sleeping Disciples (nos 21 and 22). These were the prelude to nearly half a century of sustained creativity, during which he would construct more than twenty chapels and populate them with scores and scores of figures, while also working periodically at the Sacri Monti then under construction at Orta and Oropa.

Giovanni d'Enrico's first task as artistic director of the Sacro Monte was the design and construction of Pilate's Palace. Alessi had drafted a project for it as a multi-roomed, two-storey edifice, but his design bears only a general resemblance to the actual building.⁵⁷ Alfani may also have produced a design for the palace; the present building is probably by Giovanni d'Enrico, though it may be a reworking of Alfani's design. Bascapè issued his definitive orders for the building in 1602.⁵⁸ Construction did not proceed smoothly, however, because Bascapè caused the entrance to be moved and some of the chapels to be rearranged. Six years would pass before the interior spaces forming the chapels were ready to receive their statues and decoration.

Once Pilate's Palace was built, Giovanni d'Enrico began modelling figures for three of its chapels: the Flagellation (no. 30), the Crowning with Thorns (no. 31), and the Ecce Homo (no. 33). His brother Melchiorre returned from Rome at some time before 1607, when we find him colouring the statues Giovanni modelled. The small Flagellation chapel, excavated from the rock

⁵⁶ Not to be confused with his grandfather and namesake Domenico di Paride Alfani (c. 1480–1553).

⁵⁷ Alessi, *Libro dei Misteri*, ed. by Stefani Perrone, II, fols 198–205. See also the design for Caiaphas's Palace, fols 188–97.

⁵⁸ On Pilate's Palace, see Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, pp. 131–34; De Filippis, *Guida*, p. 89; Stefani Perrone, 'Giovanni d'Enrico urbanista e architetto', pp. 136–40. Both De Filippis and Stefani Perrone attribute the design to Giovanni d'Enrico. Langé, *Sacri Monti piemontesi e lombardi*, pp. 18–19, attributes it to Alfani.



Figure 5.7.
Chapel of the
Crowning with Thorns,
Sacro Monte of Varallo.
Photo by the author,
courtesy of the Ente
di Gestione dei Sacri
Monti, Varallo.

on the lower level, incorporated two wooden figures from an earlier chapel of the Flagellation, together with four terracotta figures by Giovanni d'Enrico, including the bound figure of Christ. The chapel is a scene of unrelenting brutality, expressed in the grimacing faces and violent physicality of Christ's tormentors. Similarly, in the small chapel of the Crowning with Thorns — next to the Flagellation — Giovanni's vigorous modelling conveys the ferocity of the five soldiers surrounding the slumped figure of Christ and their glee as they humiliate their helpless victim.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ On these chapels, see De Filippis, *Guida*, pp. 105–06; Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, pp. 42–46; Stefani Perrone, 'Varallo', p. 167. The original wooden figure of Christ from the earlier Flagellation chapel is now in the municipal art gallery, Varallo.



Figure 5.8. Chapel of the Ecce Homo, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Christ on the Balcony.
Photo by the author, courtesy of the Ente di Gestione dei Sacri Monti, Varallo.

The third of these chapels, the Ecce Homo, is the first one the pilgrims would encounter as they completed their ascent of the Scala Santa from the lower level. It is one of Giovanni d'Enrico's most moving creations. The *mise-en-scène* follows Bascapè's detailed instructions.⁶⁰ The ascent of the Scala Santa prepared the pilgrims for the tragic spectacle that awaited them. At the head of the stairway they knelt in front of the chapel and gazed into a two-storeyed courtyard rendered in perspective converging on the balcony of Pilate's residence. Giovanni d'Enrico modelled a total of thirty-five figures for the chapel, one of which is supposedly a self-portrait. Along the walls he deployed the figures in two lines, Scribes and Pharisees on the left, soldiers and onlookers to the right. Some turn to look backwards, inviting the pilgrims to join them and directing their eyes upwards to the balcony, where the limp, lacerated figure of Christ is supported by two guards. Above his head, a cartouche bears the Roman insignia S.P.Q.R. The priests, soldiers, and bystanders gathered below

⁶⁰ De Filippis, *Guida*, p. 110; Stefani Perrone, 'Varallo', pp. 169–70; Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, pp. 150–52; cf. Benzan, 'Behold the Man'. The arrangement of the Ecce Homo chapel on two levels is similar to the chapel of the Healing of the Paralytic (no. 15), which is a much-modified version of Alessi's design: Alessi, *Libro dei Misteri*, ed. by Stefani Perrone, I, fol. 72.



Figure 5.9.
Chapel of the Ecce
Homo, Sacro Monte
of Varallo. Detail:
Barabbas. Photo by the
author, courtesy of the
Ente di Gestione dei
Sacri Monti, Varallo.

are portrayed in different attitudes: some gaze upwards and gesticulate; some shout for Christ to be crucified and the robber Barabbas to be set free; some are absorbed in their own conversations; centre-stage, two little children sit with their pet dog, their father standing beside them; the Passion is approaching its climax, but everyday life goes on. Some of the figures are modelled after the figures in Gaudenzio's Crucifixion chapel, as Bascapè ordered; the children and dog make an explicit reference to it. Pilate is conspicuously absent, but his offstage presence is made manifest by his words above the screen: 'Behold the man'. This message is echoed in the figures of the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah painted on the wall below the balcony: the pilgrims are witnessing the fate of 'the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief' that they had foretold.

In the Ecce Homo chapel Giovanni d'Enrico had the good fortune to collaborate with a painter whose flair for dramatic effects equalled his own: Morazzone. In contrast to his work in the Ascent to Calvary chapel, where he had imitated Gaudenzio's freer manner, Morazzone composed this chapel in formal perspective, harking back to the work of the della Rovere brothers in the chapel of the Massacre of the Innocents. In the Ecce Homo chapel the two levels of Morazzone's simulated architecture form a stage-set that draws the spectator's gaze upwards to the focus of the action, Christ on the balcony. To emphasize the powerlessness of Christ, bloodstained and crowned with thorns, Morazzone and Giovanni d'Enrico made Pilate's palace a representation of worldly might. Along the walls Morazzone painted figures that merge seamlessly with Giovanni d'Enrico's statues. The checkerboard pattern of the courtyard's floor emphasizes the scene's receding perspective and leads the eye to the façade of the palace. In a telling detail, partly hidden on the right-hand wall, Morazzone painted Barabbas slipping through a simulated doorway, freed from his shackles. Morazzone and Giovanni d'Enrico had captured the action at its climactic moment: the crowd shouts for Christ's death, Barabbas is released.⁶¹

Morazzone's final work at Varallo was the chapel of the Condemnation of Christ (no. 35), the last of the sequence in Pilate's Palace, which he finished after considerable delay in 1616.⁶² It continues the Passion narrative from the previous chapel, in which Pilate washes his hands to disclaim responsibility for his judgement. Framed by Morazzone's painted arches, Giovanni d'Enrico's figure of Christ stands before Pilate on his enormous throne. Soldiers, officials, and curious onlookers surround them. Centre-stage, an official holds up a sheet of paper and reads out the judgement: on a small table in front of him a quill pen and inkwell stand ready to record it. From either side the disciples and the holy women look on, appalled. But above, glimpsed in the painted ceiling, angels bear the instruments of the Passion heavenward, foretelling the triumphal outcome of the tragedy unfolding in the courtroom. Here and in the Ecce Homo chapel, Morazzone created a formal language of theatricality that would be taken up by the next generation of artists working at the Sacro Monte: Tanzio da Varallo, Cristoforo Martinolio, and Pier Francesco Gianoli.⁶³ Morazzone

⁶¹ Stoppa, *Pier Francesco Mazzucchelli detto Il Morazzone*, pp. 52, 211–12; Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, pp. 150–51. Stefani Perrone, 'Varallo', p. 156; De Filippis, *Guida*, p. 70.

⁶² Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, pp. 156–58; Stoppa, *Pier Francesco Mazzucchelli detto Il Morazzone*, pp. 53, 225–26.

⁶³ Stoppa, *Pier Francesco Mazzucchelli detto Il Morazzone*, pp. 289–91; Stefani Perrone, 'Varallo', p. 171; Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, pp. 156–58.



Figure 5.10. Chapel of the Condemnation of Christ, Sacro Monte of Varallo.



Figure 5.11. Chapel of the Condemnation of Christ, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Detail: Ceiling.
Photos by the author, courtesy of the Ente di Gestione dei Sacri Monti, Varallo.

left Varallo in 1616. He went on to execute numerous commissions elsewhere: at Arona, Como, Novara, and Pavia; at Turin for Duke Charles Emanuel of Savoy; and at the recently founded Sacri Monti at Varese and Orta.

In 1615 Tanzio returned to Varallo from his sojourn in southern Italy, to work with his brother Giovanni, painting the architectural and figural backgrounds for three chapels on the Sacro Monte. Until recently Tanzio's dramatic energy, originality, and technical bravura did not receive the recognition they merit. The reassessment of his work is due to Giovanni Testori (1923–93), art critic, poet, dramatist, novelist, and film director. He organized an exhibition of Tanzio's work at Turin in 1959, for which he wrote the catalogue. It sparked a new interest in the painter, just as the exhibition he co-organized in 1956 had done for Gaudenzio. Thanks to Testori, to the art historians who have followed his lead, and to a major exhibition of Tanzio's work organized by Marco Bona Castellotti at Milan in 2000, we are now better equipped to appreciate his artistic brilliance.⁶⁴

Early in 1600 Tanzio and his brother Melchiorre left the Val Sesia bound for Rome, to join in the celebrations of the Jubilee, and secure the artistic training they could not obtain at home. Melchiorre returned to the Val Sesia a few years later, but Tanzio remained in Rome, training under the Cavaliere d'Arpino. Like Morazzone a few years earlier, he would have been exposed to Caravaggio's work.⁶⁵ In 1602 or 1603 he moved to Naples, where he consorted with the group of north European artists living there.⁶⁶ He left Naples in 1610 and made his way to the Abruzzi; the three works of his that have been identified from this period show that he was by now a fully mature artist capable of handling large, complex compositions.⁶⁷ He returned to Varallo in 1615, probably summoned by his brother Giovanni. On his way home he painted an altarpiece for the church of San Gervasio e Protasio in nearby Domodossola, depicting Carlo Borromeo administering the Eucharist to the victims of the plague.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Ferro, 'Tanzio e l'angelo'; Mallé, *Le arti figurative in Piemonte*, II, 50–53.

⁶⁵ For his career in southern Italy see Terzaghi, 'Tanzio, Caravaggio e compagni'. She argues for the centrality of Caravaggio's influence: 'Tanzio rimase abbagliato dalle primissime opere pubbliche del Merisi', p. 29.

⁶⁶ He received payment for two paintings in September 1609 and January 1610: Porzio, 'Tanzio da Varallo e sua cerchia', p. 53. He also painted an altarpiece for the church of Santa Restituta in Naples; Terzaghi, 'Tanzio, Caravaggio e compagni', p. 38.

⁶⁷ These are the Circumcision at Fara San Martino (1610–11), the Madonna and Child with St Francis at Colledimezzo (1611–13), and the Madonna of Constantinople at Pescocostanzo (1614).

⁶⁸ The painting was already hanging in the church in Aug. 1616: Terzaghi, 'Tanzio, Caravaggio e compagni', p. 43.



Figure 5.12. Chapel of Christ's First Appearance before Pilate, Sacro Monte of Varallo.
Photo by the author, courtesy of the Ente di gestione dei Sacri Monti, Varallo.

Over the next dozen years Tanzio collaborated with his brothers on two chapels in Pilate's Palace, Christ's First Appearance before Pilate (no. 27) and Pilate Washing his Hands (no. 34), and on the separate chapel of Christ before Herod (no. 28) in the Piazza dei Tribunali.⁶⁹ Caravaggio's influence is at once apparent in the intensity of these scenes, as is the influence of Tanzio's predecessors at the Sacro Monte, especially Morazzone. Testori argues that the power of Tanzio's work should be ascribed to his deep religious faith and his affinity to Franciscan spirituality. In his last years he painted the Martyrdom of the Franciscans at Nagasaki for the Reformed Observants at Santa Maria delle Grazie, and he is traditionally supposed to have resided with them there. This seems doubtful, however, since in 1628 he is recorded as married to a local woman at Varallo.⁷⁰

The figures in Tanzio's crowded frescoes complement the tight-packed masses of statues that his brother Giovanni was placing in these three chapels. Like the statues, Tanzio's painted figures depict a variety of local types, in which the audience would recognize themselves, along with soldiers in variants of antique armour and what appear to be officials dressed in contemporary costume. They are painted with an often violent realism which recalls Caravaggio, but which also stands solidly within the Valsesian tradition of the unflinching, even grotesque depiction of persons and emotions. Tanzio organized his fresco backgrounds as perspective spaces, either as interiors, in Pilate Washing his Hands (painted in 1618–19) and Christ before Herod (painted in 1628–30), or as a cityscape of towers and palaces, in Christ's First Appearance before Pilate (painted in 1617).

Tanzio's composition here centres on a broad avenue lined with tall buildings, partly based on contemporary engravings of Jerusalem, to convey the city's splendour. In the distance looms an obelisk, surmounted by the Turkish crescent, and several of the figures wear turbans, perhaps referring back to Gaudenzio's Crucifixion. Tanzio painted the balcony of Pilate's residence to resemble the balcony in the Ecce Homo chapel, as a visual link between the representations of the building in the two chapels. In all three of the chapels that he decorated, he inserted framed panels of episodes prefiguring the events or foretelling their consequences, as Bascapè had required in the chapel of the Ascent to Calvary. The panels in Christ's First Appearance before Pilate repre-

⁶⁹ De Filippis, 'Tanzio da Varallo al Sacro Monte'; De Filippis, *Guida*, pp. 98, 101, 113.

⁷⁰ She is listed as his heir in his will, February 1628; Terzaghi, 'Tanzio, Caravaggio e compagni', p. 41. The Martyrdom of the Franciscans at Nagasaki is now in the Brera Gallery, Milan.

sent Daniel before Darius, his imprisonment in the tower, and in the lions' den, to prefigure Christ's trial; its aftermath is depicted in a panel depicting Judas Iscariot's suicide. Similarly, in the chapel of Pilate Washing his Hands Tanzio inserted panels depicting Christ appearing to Pilate's wife in a dream, and the coming destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman army.⁷¹

In the interior scenes of Pilate Washing his Hands (no. 34), and Christ before Herod (no. 28), Tanzio stages the action in lofty tribunals, following in the tradition of theatrical spaces established by the della Rovere brothers and Morazzone. The grandeur of the architecture he painted for these scenes accentuates the pathos of the events taking place within it. In the chapel of Christ before Herod the tall arches dwarf the wounded, humiliated figure of Christ as, hands bound and head bowed, he is led to judgement before the king seated on his throne. The contrast between Herod's absolute power and the utter powerlessness of Christ is plain for all to see. Similarly, Tanzio's Pilate Washing his Hands contrasts the broken figure of Christ — draped with a red cloak in mocking reference to the imperial purple — with the enthroned figure of Pontius Pilate, the embodiment of Rome's worldly might. In their grand scale these theatrical spaces and their multitudes of figures stand in stark contrast to the unassuming simplicity of Caimi's original chapels.

The chapel depicting Christ before Herod marked the end of the partnership between Giovanni d'Enrico and his brother. Tanzio did not work again on the Sacro Monte, but he remained at Varallo, executing commissions for local patrons and for churches in the Val Sesia and the surrounding region. Among the works of this later period is the great canvas of 'Sennacherib and the Angel' in the basilica of San Gaudenzio at Novara, much admired by Giovanni Testori.

Two talented painters now took Tanzio's place as Giovanni's collaborators. The first was Cristoforo Martinolio (c. 1599–after 1663), called 'Il Rocca' after his birthplace, Roccapietra in the Val Sesia.⁷² During his first stay at Varallo in 1620 Martinolio painted the architectural background — now sadly deteriorated — for the small chapel of the Flagellation on the lower level of Pilate's Palace (no. 30), framing the figures by Giovanni d'Enrico. Shortly afterwards he painted the background for the Curing of the Paralytic (no. 15), designed on two levels to accommodate the miracle in accordance with the scriptural account.⁷³

⁷¹ Stefani Perrone, 'Varallo', pp. 164–65, 170; De Filippis, *Guida*, pp. 98, 101, 115; Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, pp. 136–41, 153–55; Mallé, *Le arti figurative in Piemonte*, II, 52–53.

⁷² On Martinolio, see Debiaggi, *Dizionario degli artisti valesiani*, pp. 111–12; Pacciarotti, 'Scheda', pp. 125–26.

⁷³ Alessi's design, on two levels, is in Alessi, *Libro dei Misteri*, ed. by Stefani Perrone, I,

Martinolio painted the lower level in perspective as a hemispherical room with a cornice and marble pilasters. Christ is seated in the centre, with his disciples on either side, dressed not in local costume but in long robes, for historical accuracy. Men on the roof have lowered the paralysed man to the floor in front of Christ, who heals him. The onlookers watch in amazement as the man half-rises from the floor and raises a hand to show he is cured.

Martinolio returned to Varallo in 1642 to fresco the chapel of Christ before Caiaphas (no. 25) in the Piazza dei Tribunali. The building, designed by Giovanni d'Enrico, was finished in 1617, and the figures he and his assistant Giacomo Ferro modelled for it were installed in 1628.⁷⁴ In the centre, Caiaphas sits on a magnificent throne with a fringed canopy; Christ stands before him with an escort of soldiers. Around them Martinolio painted an architectural framework of pillars and arches, peopled with spectators and soldiers. He signed it in 1642. The colours are vivid and bright. On the left-hand wall Martinolio painted the preceding scene of Christ being led to judgement, and on the opposite wall, the subsequent scene as Christ is led away after Caiaphas has pronounced his verdict, blindfolded, and surrounded by guards. In the arched openings behind Caiaphas's throne Martinolio painted a line of turbaned soldiers. Their spears form an uneven line pointing upwards, adding a note of menace. Following what was by now standard practice, three painted panels on the upper walls depict biblical scenes of fateful errors presaging the event: the blinding of Samson, King Ahab judging the prophet Micah, and the Israelites worshipping the golden calf.⁷⁵

Giovanni d'Enrico's other collaborator in his later years at the Sacro Monte was the Milanese painter Melchiorre Gherardini (1607–68), the pupil and son-in-law of Giovanni Battista Crespi, 'Il Cerano' — hence Gherardini's nickname 'Il Ceranino'.⁷⁶ He began his artistic career as one of the original students of the Ambrosian Academy founded by Federico Borromeo, of which Crespi was the first director. He went on to establish his reputation as a painter of altarpieces for various clients in Lombardy, often in collaboration with former members of his mentor's workshop. At Varallo between 1637 and 1642 he painted the

fol. 69–76. Finished by 1578, the chapel stood empty until Giovanni d'Enrico modelled the figures for it about 1620; De Filippis, *Guida*, p. 71.

⁷⁴ On Ferro, see Debiaggi, *Dizionario degli artisti valsesiani*, pp. 62–63.

⁷⁵ Stefani Perrone, 'Varallo', pp. 156, 167; De Filippis, *Guida*, p. 94; Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, pp. 146–47.

⁷⁶ Spiriti, 'Gherardini, Melchiorre'.

frescoes for the two chapels recently constructed by Giovanni d'Enrico on either side of Gaudenzio's Crucifixion: Jesus Nailed to the Cross (no. 37), and the Deposition (no. 39).⁷⁷ Bascapè had ordered the construction of the former chapel in 1603 but work did not start until 1632. Between about 1635 and 1638 Giovanni d'Enrico and his assistants placed an agitated mass of sixty-four figures in this chapel — soldiers on horseback, executioners, and onlookers including children. The figures milling around the prone figure of Christ as he is nailed to the cross are a direct continuation of the tumultuous crowds in Tabacchetti's Ascent to Calvary chapel preceding it, and anticipate the crowd in Gaudenzio's Crucifixion chapel immediately following it. In the clouds above the gruesome scene, Gherardini inserted panels depicting biblical prefigurations: the sacrifice of Isaac; Jacob receiving Joseph's bloody shirt, foreshadowing the High Priests handing over Christ to Pontius Pilate; and the Expulsion from Paradise, the original sin for which Christ's sacrifice would atone.

The chapel of the Deposition (no. 39) was part of Bascapè's plan for completing the historical sequence of the Passion, but construction on it did not start until about 1633. Giovanni d'Enrico designed it to fit the narrow site atop the rock alongside the Crucifixion chapel, and between 1637 and 1640 he modelled the dead Christ and the mourners at the foot of the massive cross, which dominates the scene. The mood here is sombre, sorrowful, resigned, in total contrast to the violence and raw emotions depicted in the three preceding chapels: the stillness after the storm. The tumult is over: Christ is dead, and the mourners' task now is to lay him to rest. This atmosphere of grief and resignation will be maintained through the three succeeding chapels, the Pietà, the Laying of Christ in the Shroud, and the Sepulchre.

In the Deposition chapel, the Apostle John, the grieving women, Nicodemus, and Joseph of Arimathea stare upwards at Christ's lifeless body as it is lowered down a ladder. On the walls, in a deliberate echo of Gaudenzio's frescoes in the adjoining chapel of the Crucifixion, Gherardini painted a cavalcade of warriors on caparisoned steeds, and on the ceiling, flights of sorrowing angels. He also painted three biblical prefigurations of the event: Cain's murder of Abel, anticipating Christ's death at the hands of his own people; Moses breaking the tablets of the law when the Israelites worshipped the golden calf; and the High Priest Aaron, whom Christ was destined to supersede.⁷⁸ The narrowness and

⁷⁷ De Filippis, *Guida*, pp. 121, 125; Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, pp. 187–89. An earlier chapel representing the Virgin fainting was demolished to make room for the Nailing to the Cross.

⁷⁸ De Filippis, *Guida*, p. 125; Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, pp. 217–22; Stefani Perrone, 'Varallo', p. 177, says Bartolomeo Ravelli collaborated on the design of the chapel.



Figure 5.13. Chapel of the Deposition, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Figures below the Cross.



Figure 5.14. Chapel of the Deposition, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Detail: Two old men. Photos by the author, courtesy of the Ente di Gestione dei Sacri Monti, Varallo.

height of the chapel, dictated by the limited space on the rocky outcrop next to the Crucifixion chapel, add to the pervasive sense of tragedy, beautifully expressed in the figure of the two old men in peasant clothing, one of whom peers up from under the brim of his hat as Christ's body is lowered from the cross. This chapel is one of the most moving on the Sacro Monte and shows that age had not dimmed Giovanni d'Enrico's imagination and technical skill. Samuel Butler was particularly drawn to the old man, the 'Vecchietto', which he considered the most moving figure in the chapel.⁷⁹

Giovanni d'Enrico ended his long career at the Sacro Monte by modelling figures for three more of the chapels projected by Bishop Bascapè. The first was the small chapel of Christ Led to the Praetorium (no. 32) on the lower level of Pilate's Palace, for which he created five Roman soldiers escorting Christ to the palace. Giovanni augmented them with three wooden statues taken from earlier chapels. Two of them — Christ and the executioner leading him by a rope around his neck — came from the former chapel of the Stripping of Christ. They are attributed to Gaudenzio and date from before 1514. The third figure probably came from the mid-sixteenth century chapel of the Taking of Christ, superseded by the new one recently constructed next to Pilate's Palace (no. 23).⁸⁰

For the second of these chapels, the Pietà (no. 40), Giovanni repurposed the chapel originally dedicated to the Stripping of Christ. Here he modelled the Virgin as she weeps over the body of Christ cradled in her lap, in a pose recalling Michelangelo's Pietà. Mary Magdalene looks down over the Virgin's shoulder; two sorrowing women hold Christ's hands and feet, and stare at his wounds. Behind them, Saint John spreads his hands in a gesture of horror and incredulity. On the wall behind the figures, incongruously, Gaudenzio's original fresco of the Ascent to Calvary remained in place.⁸¹

For the third of these chapels, Christ's Second Appearance before Pilate (no. 29), in the lower level of Pilate's Palace, Giovanni d'Enrico modelled Christ and the soldiers standing guard around him. Some of them are in modern dress, armed with halberds, while others wear a kind of Roman armour,

⁷⁹ Butler, *Ex Voto*, pp. 178–85. Butler, however, incorrectly attributed it to Tabacchetti, believing that d'Enrico was incapable of the 'truth to nature' and depth of feeling he discerned in the figure.

⁸⁰ Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, pp. 146–47; Stefani Perrone, 'Varallo', p. 168; De Filippis, *Guida*, p. 109.

⁸¹ De Filippis, *Guida*, p. 126; Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, p. 223; Stefani Perrone, 'Varallo', p. 177. The three wooden figures were moved from here to the chapel of Christ Led to the Praetorium (no. 32) in 1628.



Figure 5.15. Chapel of the Pietà, Sacro Monte of Varallo.
Photo by the author, courtesy of the Ente di Gestione dei Sacri Monti, Varallo.

repeating the combination of ancient and modern weaponry and costume that Gaudenzio had pioneered in the Crucifixion chapel.

The frescoes in this chapel were the work of a local artist, Pier Francesco Gianoli (1624–92).⁸² He was born at Campertogno in the northern part of the Val Sesia; his father was a prosperous silk-merchant. Pier Francesco served his artistic apprenticeship first in Milan and then, around 1650, in Rome, where he is recorded as belonging to the Academy of Saint Luke. Soon afterwards he returned to Lombardy, working at Novara and in the Val Sesia. About 1654 he produced a cycle of paintings for the collegiate church of San Gaudenzio in Varallo, depicting six episodes in the life of the patron saint. In 1657 he decorated the chapel of Christ Led to the Praetorium in the lower level of Pilate's Palace (no. 32), painting a frieze of soldiers along the wall behind the file of soldiers escorting Christ that Giovanni d'Enrico had arranged to fit into the narrow chapel. In 1668 Gianoli painted a sequence of seven splendid canvases for the Confraternity of Santa Marta at Varallo, depicting its activities: the redemption of Christian captives, the consolation of condemned criminals, the

⁸² There is no monograph on Gianoli. See Debiaggi, 'Il pittore Francesco Gianoli di Campertogno'; Ancilotto, 'Gianoli, Pietro Fancesco'.

members accompanying the bishop in procession.⁸³ His last work at Varallo was the figures along the walls of the chapel of Christ's Second Appearance before Pilate (no. 29). About 1670 the Grandi brothers, specialists in illusionist architectural backgrounds, designed the interior as a vast audience chamber with arches and columns. Gianoli added the soldiers and onlookers in the spaces between the columns, and signed his work in 1679.

Giovanni d'Enrico left Varallo in 1642, accompanied by Giacomo Ferro, for Montrigone, near Borgosesia, where a sanctuary to the Virgin was under construction. It had been founded in gratitude for deliverance from the plague by a wealthy local inhabitant. Ferro received the commission to model the figures for the sanctuary, for Giovanni d'Enrico was now very old; he died at Montrigone in 1644.⁸⁴ His departure from the Sacro Monte closed a decisive period in its artistic development. He and his brothers, especially Tanzio, bequeathed a legacy of extreme realism and grand theatrical settings to the next generation of artists. Giovanni's artistic reputation had led to commissions for him to work at other sanctuaries in the region. In the 1620s he and his brother Melchiorre were called to Oropa to design a complex of chapels representing the life of the Virgin Mary. In 1630 the *fabbricieri* of the Sacro Monte at Orta engaged him, along with Giacomo Ferro, to produce figures for three of the chapels there. In this way he played a central role in transmitting the formula for a sequence of chapels peopled by realistic figures from Varallo to the second generation of Sacri Monti then taking shape in the north-western Alps.

The Basilica of the Virgin

In 1609 Giovanni d'Enrico received the commission to design the new church, or basilica, dedicated to the Virgin Mary. It was to replace the chapel of the Assumption (the 'Chiesa Vecchia') dating from Caimi's time, which could no longer accommodate the numbers of pilgrims flocking to it. He designed it with the aid of his assistant (or pupil), Bartolomeo Ravelli (c. 1589–1646). His father Gaudenzio was a sculptor and wood-carver, and his uncles Pietro and Anselmo had founded the first printing establishment in Varallo. Bartolomeo

⁸³ Di Macco and Romano, *Diana Trionfatrice*, pp. 234–38. The series, now in the municipal art gallery of Varallo, may have originally comprised eight paintings. Cf. De Filippis, *Guida*, p. 152.

⁸⁴ On this sanctuary, later rededicated to St Anne, see Tonella Regis, 'Sant'Anna a Montrigone di Borgosesia'; Stoppa, 'Nel 1631 a Montrigone di Borgosesia'; Stoppa, 'Beata Vergine delle Grazie in Montrigone di Borgosesia'.

also worked as a wood-carver; he and his father constructed the wooden grating for the chapel of the Ecce Homo chapel in 1621.⁸⁵

The *fabbricieri* had voted on 19 July 1609 to build the new church. Their decision was the result of a donation from Agostino (or Agosto) Beccaria, a nobleman from Pavia, to pay for the design of the new basilica and the construction of its choir, and for a plan of the Sacro Monte. Beccaria was an extremely generous patron: if we add up the donations he made between 1609 and 1613, they come to the colossal sum of 15,600 *lire*.⁸⁶ On 7 April 1614 Gerolamo d'Adda submitted d'Enrico's and Ravelli's design to the *fabbricieri*.⁸⁷ It was approved, and in a ceremony on 9 June the foundation stone of the new basilica was laid. It would eventually reorient the devotional focus of the Sacro Monte. In Caimi's original Passion-centred schema, the Virgin Mary had played a secondary role, but in the course of the sixteenth century her cult became increasingly important. Its locus shifted from the Tomb of the Virgin, in the Valley of Jehoshaphat, to the 'Chiesa Vecchia', with its statue of the Sleeping Virgin, held to be a work by Saint Luke that Caimi had brought back from Palestine. The building of the new basilica to house this figure marked a step in the elevation of the cult of the Virgin to parity with the cult of the Passion.

The foundation of the basilica was recorded in a formal document stating that it was and would remain the property of the *fabbricieri* and the *vicini*, and that the Reformed Observants could lay no claim to it. The document paid special tribute to Gerolamo d'Adda's role in the new foundation, as befitted a descendant of Milano Scarognini.⁸⁸ The Reformed Observants had evidently given prior assent to this arrangement, so after the document had been read out, and a 'devout procession' carrying the statue of the Virgin had sanctified the event, the vicar of Santa Maria delle Grazie, deputizing for the absent guardian, joined with the *fabbricieri* in laying the foundation stone. Listed among the witnesses to the act of foundation was Giovanni d'Enrico.

The construction of the basilica would be a long-drawn operation. The choir was consecrated by Bishop Tornielli of Novara in 1649; the statue of the Virgin was carried in procession from the Chiesa Vecchia to its new resting-place, in

⁸⁵ On the Ravelli, see Tonetti, *Le famiglie valsesiane*, pp. 186–91, and Tables I and II; cf. Testori and Stefani Perrone, *Artisti del legno*, pp. 154, 162.

⁸⁶ ASV, Archivio d'Adda, m. 1, no. 23; Tonetti, *Museo*, IV, no. 7, pp. 117–18, prints a list of his donations.

⁸⁷ Stefani Perrone, 'Giovanni d'Enrico urbanista e architetto', pp. 132–33.

⁸⁸ 'Protesta', 9 June 1614, BRT MP, C 36 31, no. 8.



Figure 5.16. Piazza of the Basilica (Piazza Giovanni Paolo II), Sacro Monte of Varallo.
Photo by the author, courtesy of the Ente di Gestione dei Sacri Monti, Varallo.

a casket of glass and ebony on the altar.⁸⁹ But the basilica was not completed and fully decorated for almost another century, and did not receive its façade, which dominates the Piazza della Basilica, now Piazza Giovanni Paolo II, until 1906. This area, with the chapels narrating the story of the Passion grouped around the Fountain of the Risen Christ, forms the sacred counterpart to the secular space of the Piazza dei Tribunali. The construction of the basilica and the completion of the chapels facing onto the piazza proceeded in tandem, sustained by various donors and the offerings from the pilgrims.⁹⁰

War and Plague

In 1613, after more than half a century of peace in the Italian peninsula, Duke Charles Emanuel of Savoy invaded the neighbouring marquisate of Monferrato. His attack provoked immediate retaliation by the Spanish governor of Milan

⁸⁹ Stefani Perrone, 'Varallo', pp. 182–84; Testori and Stefani Perrone, *Artisti del legno*, p. 154. Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, pp. 265–68, dates the consecration to 1644.

⁹⁰ List of donations c. 1603–40 in Tonetti, *Museo*, IV, pt 7, pp. 97–120.

and led to a series of conflicts that spread across Piedmont and Lombardy, eventually involving the major European powers, and ending only in 1659.

The fighting in Lombardy periodically spilled over into the Val Sesia. The militia was mobilized to counter threats of invasion in 1614, in 1626, and again in 1635, when France entered the conflict in alliance with Duke Victor Amadeus I of Savoy. In 1636 Savoyard forces invaded the Val Sesia from the Val d'Aosta and penetrated as far as Alagna, but were repulsed by the militia, backed by Spanish regulars.⁹¹ To forestall another invasion the governor of Milan decided to station troops in the Val Sesia. The General Council of the valley protested that the presence of a garrison contravened their privileges: the troops were withdrawn, and the governor reaffirmed that the militia was not required to serve outside the valley.⁹² But the fighting posed a more insidious threat to the valley's privileges. In its perpetual search for revenue, the Spanish crown was pursuing a policy of infeudation, converting crown lands into fiefs, which it then sold. The purchasers became feudal lords with legal jurisdiction and fiscal privileges over their new subjects. In 1620 the Spanish crown decreed the infeudation of the Val Sesia. The General Council protested that the imposition of a feudal lord was contrary to its status as a *terra separata*; the Senate of Milan concurred and refused to approve the infeudation.⁹³ The threat remained that the Spanish crown would try again, as a deepening economic recession struck northern Italy, and the costs of military preparations weighed heavily on the valley's limited budget. These adverse conditions, aggravated by grain shortages, plague, and the disruption of trade and the flow of migrant labour, do much to explain the slackening pace of work on the Sacro Monte in the middle decades of the century.⁹⁴

Invading armies brought epidemics in their train. In 1624 reports of outbreaks of plague caused the authorities in the Val Sesia to impose quarantine

⁹¹ Tonetti, *Le famiglie valsesiane*, pp. 7–11; Cerino Badone, 'La milizia valsesiana e la difesa del territorio', pp. 181–89.

⁹² ASV, Carte Raccolte per il Museo Calderini (henceforth Museo Calderini), m. 8, contains documents relating to military affairs between 1614 and 1645, including the declarations by the Spanish governor in 1635 and 1636. Cf. Rizzi, *Storia della Valsesia*, pp. 277–78; Tonetti, *Le famiglie valsesiane*, pp. 11–14.

⁹³ Fassola, *La Valle Sesia descritta*, iv, pt 7, p. 109; Piemontino, 'La Valsesia', p. 80.

⁹⁴ See the bans on grain exports from the duchy of Milan in 1651 and 1654–59: Archivio di Stato di Torino, Corte, Inv. 45, Paesi di Nuovo Acquisto (henceforth AST, Corte, PNA), Valle di Sesia, m. 1, no. 12.

measures, but the valley was spared.⁹⁵ Plague again threatened in 1629, quarantine was imposed, and six commissioners were appointed to enforce it. The population sought the counsel of a revered holy man, Brother Benedetto da Milano, who lived in the Reformed Observant hospice on the Sacro Monte. He assured the people they would be spared if they sought the protection of the Virgin Mary; propitiatory processions were organized, the men carrying crosses or flagellating themselves, the women with their hair unbound. Plague struck in only a few places, and the death toll was not high.⁹⁶ In gratitude for their deliverance, in 1633 the townspeople of Varallo dedicated a statue to the Virgin and adorned it with a crown like the one worn by the Virgin in the sanctuary of Oropa; it now stands in a chapel erected for it in the church of San Gaudenzio.⁹⁷ At Montrigone a prosperous local family founded a sanctuary to the Virgin in gratitude for deliverance from the plague. Giovanni d'Enrico would spend his last years there.⁹⁸

When the French and Savoyard forces invaded the Val Sesia in 1636, Fra Benedetto again assured the people that the Virgin would protect them, and the militia duly repelled the invaders. Fra Benedetto died later in the year; his funeral was overwhelmed with crowds of grateful mourners, and miracles began to be ascribed to him.⁹⁹ Meanwhile, the fighting continued. In 1652 French and Savoyard troops raided Borgosesia, aiming to destroy the house of the official in charge of the salt tax, who was smuggling salt into Piedmont, and next year a Savoyard force attacked Montrigone. Two years later the militia repelled another raid on Borgosesia, inflicting heavy losses. In 1658 the Franco-Savoyard commanders again invaded the valley, intending to conquer Varallo and billet their troops on the local population. The militia forced them to withdraw.¹⁰⁰

In 1659 the crowns of France and Spain concluded the Treaty of the Pyrenees, fighting ceased, and the troops were disbanded. The costs of the settlement caused a rift between the valley's two administrative districts. The town of Borgosesia refused to pay its share of the levy for the discharge of the French

⁹⁵ Excerpts from the 'Ordinati' of the General Council, 1624: AST, Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m. 1, no. 13.

⁹⁶ Bossi, 'La Valsesia e il francescanesimo', pp. 142–43; Viazzo, 'L'evoluzione della popolazione della Valsesia', pp. 127–128.

⁹⁷ Cagna and Pomi, *L'Incoronata*, pp. 31–32.

⁹⁸ Tonetti, *Bibliografia valsesiana*, pp. 177–81.

⁹⁹ Cagna and Pomi, *L'Incoronata*, p. 28.

¹⁰⁰ Cerino Badone, 'La milizia valsesiana', pp. 190–94.

forces in the region, claiming that its consent had not been sought. The Corte Superiore rejected the protest, arguing that it had paid its share of the levy even though it was far from the fighting.¹⁰¹

Decades of war aggravated the endemic violence in the valley. Families prosecuted their feuds with impunity, smugglers plied their trade, and banished criminals returned to their old haunts. Bands of armed men dominated the countryside, living by extortion at the expense of the wealthier inhabitants. In an attempt to stem the violence, the authorities in Milan issued recurrent bans on the possession of arquebuses, but the frequent repetition of these bans suggests they had little effect.¹⁰² The authorities ordered the local communities not to aid criminals in their neighbourhoods, and to signal their presence by ringing the church bells. The *podestà* of Varallo and his posse of armed men were kept at work tracking down bandits and smugglers. Even the Sacro Monte was not immune from the disorder: in 1712 a band of thieves broke into the basilica and tried to steal the sacramental silver, but they were forced to abscond before they could make off with their loot.¹⁰³ Nor was decorum properly observed. In 1671 the *podestà* and the *fabbricieri* issued a decree against the 'abominable abuse' perpetrated by girls and young women who frequented the Sacro Monte, 'with notable scandal and to the detriment of divine worship', soliciting money from visitors and associating with 'foreigners and dissolute young men' who frequented the sanctuary. Local people were barred from acting as guides and soliciting payment for their services.¹⁰⁴ Times were hard, and the people of Varallo were evidently trying to make ends meet by exploiting their only asset. The Sacro Monte, envisioned by Caimi and Bascapè as a city on its hill, a New Jerusalem of peace and holiness, could not remain separate from the lawless world beyond its walls.

The Rebellion of 1678 and its Aftermath

On 15 August 1678 the perpetual tensions between the oligarchy of Varallo and the lesser communities of the Val Sesia, between town and countryside, between wealth and poverty, erupted in an outburst of popular violence.

¹⁰¹ Declaration of Corte Superiore, 8 February 1659, AST, Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m.1, no.12.

¹⁰² 'Grìde', 7 April 1652, 29 December 1655, 23 August 1669; banning arquebuses, AST, Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m. 1, no. 12; cf. Fassola, *La Valle Sesia descritta*, IV, pt 7, p. 121.

¹⁰³ Chiara, *Storia*, fols 370–71.

¹⁰⁴ 'Ordinanza', 12 June 1671, ASV, Sacro Monte, m. 3.

Longstanding grievances at the dominance of Varallo and the chicaneries practised by its lawyers and notaries were the root cause of the revolt, but its immediate cause was the famine then ravaging northern Italy, the culmination of several years of bad harvests. The Val Sesia, dependent on imported rice and grain from the Novarese, was particularly hard hit. Already in early August unrest had broken out in Varallo when the *podestà* issued orders restricting the trade in grain.¹⁰⁵

The violence that broke out on 15 August, however, was far more than a food riot.¹⁰⁶ It was a well-planned uprising that rallied people from different communities in defence of what they called the 'Common Cause'. The rebels converged on Varallo to meet on the agreed day, the Feast of the Assumption.¹⁰⁷ They massed outside the residence of the *podestà*, demanding that he revoke his restrictions on the import of foodstuffs and punish the persons responsible for the high price of grain. The *podestà* fled, leaving the government leaderless, and the rebels set fire to his residence. In the conflagration the town's archives were destroyed. The rioters then besieged the residence of the Morgiazzi family, rich merchants, whom they believed were the prime authors of the grain shortage. A shot was fired from within; the crowd burst in, ransacked the house, and the Morgiazzi fled. The crowd then sacked the residence of the *sindaco*, Cesare Luini, and attacked the residences of other leading families — the Baldo, Ranzio, and Matacci — taking their stocks of grain and raiding their wine-cellars. A raucous bacchanal ensued. The rebellion would be remembered as 'the war of the Morgiazzi', the title of a mock-heroic dialect ballad recounting the day's events.¹⁰⁸ In contrast to the rebels who rose against the oligarchs of Varallo in 1518 and despoiled the Sacro Monte, the rioters in 1678 did not attack it: their fury was aimed directly at the families who oppressed them, not at symbols of their power.

Order was restored by a Milanese magistrate, Gabriele Serbelloni, marquis of Romagnano (1635–1712), who happened to be visiting the Sacro Monte at

¹⁰⁵ 'Grìde' against hoarding and exporting grain, 1651 and 1669, and Orders to maintain free import of grain to the Val Sesia, 26 June 1674 and 23 February 1675, AST, Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m. 1, nos 12, 21; see also excerpts detailing events from the 'Ordinati' of the Council of the Valle Superiore, no. 22.

¹⁰⁶ Among the rebels were some Walser from Alagna: Viazzo, 'Il bilinguismo', pp. 285–86.

¹⁰⁷ For the sequence of events, see Tonetti, *Le famiglie valesiane*, pp. 80–116; Tonetti, *Storia della Vallesesia*, pp. 505–12; Piemontino, 'La Valsesia', pp. 63–67. For another case of a revolt on the feast of the Assumption, see Burke, 'The Virgin of the Carmine and the Revolt of Masaniello'.

¹⁰⁸ Viazzo, 'Il bilinguismo', p. 285.

that moment. He told the rioters that he would write to the governor of Milan explaining their grievances, and that he would ask the authorities in Milan to free the importation of grain and punish the officials who had conspired to profit from the shortages.¹⁰⁹ Over the next few days the authorities in Milan appointed Serbelloni governor of the Val Sesia, with wide emergency powers, dismissed the former *podestà*, and appointed a replacement. On 23 August Serbelloni convoked the General Council of the valley. It obediently dismissed a number of officials, and banished the Morgiazzi family, together with other persons judged responsible for the recent troubles. It then voted to reform the government by establishing a Board of Regents, comprising eight members from the Curia Superiore and four from the Curia Inferiore, to administer the valley, root out corruption, settle disputes, and enact reforms. The new board was elected a month later. On 30 September the General Council enacted measures to reduce the fees charged by judges, lawyers, and notaries, and to alleviate the lot of poor prisoners held in the town's jail, for 'there is nothing more necessary and pious in public government than relieving the poor and the miserable to the highest degree possible, and especially the poor in prison.'¹¹⁰ These high-flown sentiments seemed to suggest, for a moment, that a new era had dawned in the politics of Varallo and the Val Sesia.

For the next couple of years the Board of Regents enacted minor reforms and maintained a fragile peace. In 1679, probably to forestall renewed disturbances during the Feast of the Assumption and to make the celebration inclusive of the valley's population as a whole, the General Council decreed that every community was to send two delegates to the festivities, bearing a large candle emblazoned with the name of their community. The candles were to remain permanently in the Basilica of the Virgin on the Sacro Monte to commemorate the participation of the communities that donated them, along with those donated by the people of Varallo.¹¹¹ In May 1681 the regents renegotiated

¹⁰⁹ He commanded a company of infantry in Lombardy in 1656; served on the city council of Milan 1666–93, holding a number of municipal offices; he became duke of San Gabrio in 1684, and a grandee of Spain in 1710. See the Appendix by Franco Arese Lucini, in Zanetti, *La demografia del patriziato milanese*, p. 154. Rizzi, *Storia della Valsesia*, p. 288, prints his letter to the governor, 16 Aug. 1678.

¹¹⁰ '[...] non essendosi cosa più necessaria, e pia nel governo di un Publico, che il tenere più sollevati che sij possibile li Poveri, e miserabili, e particolarmente li Poveri carcerati', Extract of Ordinati of Consiglio della Valle Superiore, AST, Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m. 1, no. 22; 'Ristretto de' Privilegi [...]', AST, Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m. 3, no. 1.

¹¹¹ 'Manifesto', ASV, Museo Calderini, m. 13, no 7.

the terms of the salt tax and lowered the price by transferring the salt monopoly from the tax-farmers in Turin, who had secured the contract the year before, back to the authorities in Milan.¹¹² Behind the scenes, however, intrigues continued. The Morgiazzi and other exiles lobbied for permission to return to Varallo, and in November 1682 the new governor of Milan granted their wish. They returned, but were soon forced into exile again.

The uprising of 1678 laid bare the deep-seated enmities within the ruling oligarchy; factions manoeuvred for control of the new Board of Regents. One was headed by Giovanni Battista Feliciano Fassola, an ambitious notable who commanded a loyal following.¹¹³ His family owned land in the Val di Rassa, at the upper end of the valley, and were prosperous merchants. His father had won renown as a commander of the local militia, and was revered for distributing food to the poor during famines. The Fassola were embroiled in a feud with a rival clan, the Alberganti, which had come to a head following a dispute in the General Council in August 1672. After the meeting Giovanni Battista's brother Antonio and his cousin Francesco tried to shoot the *sindaco*, Alberto Alberganti. They were a dangerous pair: earlier in the year they had killed a customs officer who caught them smuggling wine at Romagnano. Antonio's shot missed its target, and he fled. He died in exile not long afterwards, but the bitterness between the two families continued to fester. Because of these crimes the Fassola's fortunes were now in jeopardy, and they were further imperilled by a dispute between Giovanni Battista and his brothers and uncles over the inheritance left by his father.

Giovanni Battista Feliciano Fassola had been intended for a clerical career. In 1669 he became a canon in the newly established chapter of the church of San Gaudenzio in Varallo, and in 1671 he was appointed the agent of the *vicinanza* in their dealings with the Reformed Observant Brothers over the affairs of the Sacro Monte. But he was unsuited for the religious life, and in 1676 he resigned his canonry and returned to the secular life, intending to devote himself to literature. He had already written a heroic romance and two historical works, the first of many he would produce in the course of his long career. One was a treatise on the Sacro Monte entitled *La Nuova Gierusalemme*, published in 1671, which was both a history of the sanctuary and a guide for pilgrims.

¹¹² AST, Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m. 1, no. 12, and m. 2, no. 1; Rizzi, *Storia della Valsesia*, p. 282.

¹¹³ For Fassola's career, see Rastelli, 'Giovanni Battista Feliciano Fassola'; Rizzi, *Storia della Valsesia*, pp. 290–94; Tonetti, *Le famiglie valesiane*, pp. 20–48; Tonetti, *Storia della Vallesesia*, pp. 513–17; Romerio, 'Il "Liber Itineraris Galliae"'; Strigini, 'Giovanni Battista Fassola e alcune lettere inedite'; Lemoine, *Primi Visconti*, 'Introduction'.



Figure 5.17. The Sacro Monte of Varallo. 1671. Frontispiece of Giovanni Battista Fassola, *La Nuova Gierusalemme o sia il Santo Sepolcro di Varallo* (Milan: Federico Agnelli, 1671).

The other was *La Valle Sesia Descritta*, a fanciful history of the Val Sesia from the earliest times, replete with errors, flights of fancy, and falsifications, but valuable for its citation of documents and chronicles that are now lost. It was written in 1669 but was not published until the end of the nineteenth century.¹¹⁴ As a further honour to his *patria*, Fassola would later commission the engraver Johann Blasius Manauft to produce maps and views of Varallo and the Sacro Monte, including a general view of the town.¹¹⁵

Having reached an agreement with his brothers over the inheritance, early in 1672 Giovanni Battista left the Val Sesia for France, where he remained for

¹¹⁴ Tonetti published it in instalments in his *Museo* between 1887 and 1891, but he used an incomplete manuscript: Rastelli, 'Giovanni Battista Feliciano Fassola', p. 446.

¹¹⁵ Published in 1688 and dedicated to the woman whom he had recently married, Margu rite L onard, Madame de Neubourg; on the marriage, see Lemoine, *Primi Visconti*, pp. xxiii–xxix.

the next decade. This was the start of an adventurous career far from his homeland. In Paris he soon developed a reputation as a fortune-teller, a finder of hidden treasure, and a purveyor of medical cures — or more accurately, a confidence-man and a quack. His supposed magical abilities attracted the attention of members of Louis XIV's court, and he became the protégé of the Duc de Vendôme and his brother, forming a relationship with them that would endure for the rest of his life. With their powerful support he turned to the slightly more respectable profession of journalism; in 1675 he began publishing an annual almanac, followed by a weekly news-sheet, which quickly failed. He then turned his hand to history, writing accounts of Louis XIV's campaigns in 1677 and 1678. Meanwhile he branched out into espionage and politics. He went on secret missions to England and Holland, and acted as an adviser on Italian affairs to Louis XIV's ministers. In 1682 the publication of his history of Louis XIV's Dutch war landed him in the Bastille for six months because it disclosed the existence of the secret Treaty of Dover signed by Louis XIV and Charles II of England in 1670.¹¹⁶ By now Giovanni Battista was a well-known figure at the French court. He had been presented to the king and the dauphin, and had taken to calling himself Conte Fassola, along with various other picturesque aliases and self-awarded titles: Abate Visconti and Primi Visconti, the *nom de plume* under which he wrote a memoir of the French court, or Conte di San Maiolo and Comte de la Sourbe, from properties his family owned in the Val di Rassa.¹¹⁷

Fassola returned to the Val Sesia in 1681 to settle further disputes with his relatives, and then returned to Paris. In April 1683 he came back again to Varallo, this time with political ambitions and the intention to stay. In October 1683 the election fell due for the Board of Regents, which had been reduced from twelve to three members in 1680. Fassola's prestige and influence were such that he was voted in by acclaim, with two colleagues. He immediately began to promulgate a series of reforms that championed the lesser communities that had been the driving force of the revolt in 1678. He maintained the free importation of grain and rice into the valley. He established an archive for official documents, to replace the one lost in the fire in 1678, and to make it more difficult to pervert litigation by concealing or destroying documents. He instituted mechanisms to pacify feuds and mediate disputes between commu-

¹¹⁶ Rastelli, 'Giovanni Battista Feliciano Fassola', pp. 456–57, argues that Louis XIV covertly authorized this leak to embarrass Charles II during the 'Popish Plot' crisis in England.

¹¹⁷ Rastelli, 'Giovanni Battista Feliciano Fassola', p. 447.

nities. To maintain public order, he established squads of armed men to patrol the valley and its borders. His reforms were not entirely disinterested. They were evidently designed to build up a popular following, and enhance his family's influence at the expense of his rivals. His reforms, however, alienated many of the dominant families. His armed patrols led to accusations that he intended to lead the rural people in an attack on Varallo, or that he was planning to hand the Val Sesia over to France: his well-known ties to the French court made this accusation plausible.

Fassola's downfall came swiftly. On 14 October 1684, in what was evidently a coup co-ordinated with the aid of the *podestà* and the Spanish governor of Milan, the General Council voted to end his term as regent, a year early. His enemies had convinced the Spanish authorities that he was plotting to introduce French troops into the Val Sesia, as a bridgehead for an invasion of Lombardy. Governor Melgar sent Spanish troops to garrison Varallo. To take Fassola's place as regent, the General Council appointed Guglielmo Maria d'Adda, and as a sop, offered to make Fassola his deputy. Fassola refused and quickly decamped from Varallo, fearing arrest. His ouster triggered a ripple of popular unrest: several rural communities declared their support for him, but his enemies were too powerful and no uprising ensued. In December he fled from the Val Sesia with Spanish troops hard on his heels, never to return.¹¹⁸ He went first to Turin and then to Paris. His properties in the Val Sesia were seized and sold. The rest of his life would be spent in France, where he resumed his life as a courtier and his avocation as a historian, and married a wealthy widow, Madame de Neubourg, the daughter of a rich Parisian bookseller and printer. His attempt to reform the government of his homeland, self-interested though it may have been, had failed, and the local oligarchy quickly forgot any lessons it might have learned from the rebellion of 1678. The old system of government reasserted itself, with Varallo dominating the lesser communities, and its families monopolising the chief political offices.

Fassola's rivals, the Alberganti, now dominated the political life of Varallo and the Val Sesia. Originally from the outlying community of Cravagliana, they gravitated like other rising families to Varallo, where they established themselves in the early seventeenth century and began to contract marriage alliances with the town's leading clans. They amassed wealth and influence in the customary way, as landowners, moneylenders, and merchants; as lawyers, notaries,

¹¹⁸ See his 'Factum' (undated) describing these events, Lemoine, *Primi Visconti*, pp. 335–49.

and physicians; and as public officials.¹¹⁹ Their residence opposite the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie housed a collection of pictures and objets d'art, and an impressive library numbering 1,100 volumes. Their commercial interests included the trade in Indian printed textiles, then coming into fashion, so when the government banned the importation of these goods in 1722, they protested strenuously.¹²⁰ The heads of the Alberganti family, Silvestro, a lawyer, and his younger brother Giacomo, a captain of the militia, were regularly re-elected regents of the Curia Superiore after 1689. Silvestro would be one of the three deputies from the Val Sesia sent to negotiate the renewal of the valley's privileges with Duke Victor Amadeus II of Savoy when he became the sovereign of the Val Sesia in 1707.¹²¹ If we are to believe the allegations of a disgruntled petitioner, the Alberganti brothers and their allies the Morgiazzi controlled the General Council by packing it with their clients, by wholesale bribery, and by sending their *bravi* to intimidate or murder their political opponents.¹²² These allegations gain credibility in the light of the irregularities in the election of deputies to the General Council uncovered by the new Savoyard *podestà* in 1713.¹²³ The ascendancy of the Alberganti would last for more than a generation, until Giacomo's death in 1741. Then their long-time rivals, the Draghetti, ousted them and took their place at the head of Varallo's oligarchy.

¹¹⁹ Tonetti, *Le famiglie valesiane*, pp. 259–66; cf. Garavaglia, 'La biblioteca degli Alberganti di Varallo Sesia', pp. 184–95.

¹²⁰ 'Dichiarazione del Capitano Giacomo Alberganti', 10 April 1722, AST, Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m. 2, no. 19.

¹²¹ Peco, *Il mutamento di dominio della Valle di Sesia*, p. 59.

¹²² Protest by Gio. Domenico Ferraris (c. 1698), AST, Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m. 4, no. 6.

¹²³ AST, Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m. 1, no. 12.

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY: THE VAL SESIA UNDER THE HOUSE OF SAVOY

The Transfer to Savoyard Sovereignty

In 1688 war broke out between Louis XIV and a coalition of powers — England, the Dutch Republic, Spain, and Austria. Two years later the fighting spread to northern Italy, when Duke Victor Amadeus II of Savoy joined the coalition, provoking a French invasion of his state and unleashing a war that would last until 1696. Thanks to its remoteness, once again the Val Sesia was untouched by the fighting. A census of men of military age was taken in 1689–90, the militia was mobilized, and provisions were ordered for a garrison of Spanish regulars to guard the entrance to the valley.¹ No invasion materialized, but the fighting in Lombardy and Piedmont spawned a renewed wave of lawlessness in the valley. In 1696 the governor of Milan issued a proclamation authorizing the local communities to capture bandits, or kill them without fear of penalties.²

War broke out again in northern Italy five years later. The throne of the Spanish empire had fallen vacant on the death of King Carlos II, who was without heirs, in November 1700, and the Habsburg and Bourbon dynasties both laid claim to it. The Spanish authorities in the duchy of Milan declared their loyalty to the Bourbon claimant, Philip V, the grandson of Louis XIV. He sent a French army to support the Spanish authorities and occupy the duchy. In the spring of 1701 the Habsburg emperor Leopold I dispatched an army under Prince Eugene of Savoy to conquer Milan and make good his dynastic claim; it

¹ 'Ristretto degli Ordinati', AST, Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m. 3, no. 1.

² 'Grida' by Governor Leganes, 23 June 1696, AST, Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m. 2, no. 3.

was the part of the Spanish empire he most coveted, for its economic and strategic value. Fighting between the Bourbon and Habsburg armies went on for two years without a decisive result, until in October 1703 Duke Victor Amadeus II of Savoy, hitherto aligned with the Bourbons, switched sides and signed an alliance with Leopold I. In return for the duke's support, the emperor promised to cede certain territories in the duchy of Milan, including the Val Sesia, to him: a promise that would only be fulfilled if the Habsburgs conquered Milan. In the spring of 1704 'German' (i.e., Habsburg) troops threatened an incursion: the militias of Varallo and Borgosesia were mobilized, and the entry to the valley near Borgosesia was fortified, but no invasion ensued.³ The valley would be spared the fighting that spread across Lombardy and into Piedmont.

The military situation changed completely on 7 September 1706, however, when the Bourbon armies besieging Turin, Victor Amadeus II's capital, were defeated by a Habsburg and Savoyard relieving force. Piedmont was quickly liberated from the Bourbon invaders, and in the following spring Prince Eugene conquered Milan and established Habsburg dominion over Lombardy. On 23 February 1707 he issued a proclamation announcing that the emperor had ceded the Val Sesia and certain other territories (Alessandria, Valenza, the Lomellina) to the House of Savoy, and that all the cities, towns, and communities, all the vassals and subjects in these territories, must recognize Victor Amadeus II as their sovereign.⁴

The duke wasted no time: within a week he appointed one of his most trusted magistrates, Count Filippo Beraudo di Pralormo, to the position of *pretore* (or *podestà*) of the Val Sesia, with orders to proceed to the valley and receive its submission.⁵ This promised to be a delicate mission. The duke was well aware of the Valsesians' deep attachment to their privileges, so Pralormo was given only a small military escort, to avoid any impression that he was leading an armed occupation. The exact terms of the valley's transfer to Savoyard rule were left open for future negotiation. Pralormo arrived at Borgosesia on 13 March 1707 and reached Varallo two days later. He received a formal welcome from the town's clergy and notables, headed by the Alberganti brothers, and

³ Orders, 10 March and 20 April 1704, AST Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m. 2, no. 21. The troops are described as 'Alemani'.

⁴ Cited in Peco, *Il mutamento di dominio*, p. 35. On the transition to Savoyard rule, see Rizzi, *Storia della Valsesia*, pp. 299–306.

⁵ 'Istruzione' for Pralormo, 26 March 1707, AST, Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m. 2, no. 11. Pralormo (1678–1753) later held high positions in the government and rose to the rank of Senator.

a public celebration with music and fireworks. On 14 March he took possession of the *pretore's* residence and swore to uphold the valley's privileges. Over the next few days he paid a formal visit to the *vicinanza* and presided over the assembly of the heads of households of Varallo, who swore fealty to their new sovereign. On 18 March it was the turn of the elected deputies of all the communities of the Val Sesia, 236 in all, to swear the oath of fealty.⁶ Finally, on 20 March — after a delay due to bad weather — Pralormo visited the Sacro Monte, where he attended a mass and Te Deum in the basilica and toured the chapels, escorted by a retinue of dignitaries.

But the crucial issue — how far Victor Amadeus would agree to uphold the valley's time-honoured privileges — still remained to be decided. The oath that Pralormo administered to the valley's deputies was purposely silent on this question; it was left to be decided in negotiations between the duke and the representatives of the valley. So a delegation of three leading citizens — including Silvestro Alberganti — left for their new capital, Turin, at the end of March. After lengthy bargaining, Victor Amadeus issued a declaration confirming the Val Sesia's privileges as they were under its previous rulers.⁷ Meanwhile, on 8 April, there were disturbances at Varallo, provoked by rumours spread by a couple of priests that the valley's privileges would be curtailed. Pralormo sternly admonished the priests, but the incident revealed just how sensitive the question of the valley's privileges was. Victor Amadeus's decision to renew the privileges was evidently based on a calculation that an attempt to deny or limit them would provoke resistance, which would distract him from his principal concern, the war he was still fighting against Louis XIV. Furthermore, any fiscal rewards he might gain by limiting the Val Sesia's privileges would have been meagre and not worth the effort of overcoming any potential resistance. All he was prepared to do at this stage was to redirect the Val Sesia's commerce, and particularly the salt trade, away from Milanese territory and towards his own domains in Piedmont. This issue was complicated by the fact that Novara and its territory, where the Valsesians had always obtained their provisions, remained under Habsburg control.⁸

⁶ 'Serments de fidélité prêtés par les Communautés de la Val de Sesia', 16–18 March 1707, AST, Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m. 2, no. 6.

⁷ Confirmation of privileges, 2 May 1707, and ratification by Senate, 5 May, AST Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m. 2, no. 10. The Valsesians retained their freedom to trade with the Milanese territory in the Novarese; cf. Piemontino, 'La Valsesia', pp. 29–30.

⁸ 'Ristretto delle lettere', 1712–13, AST, Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m. 2, no. 13.

Pralormo, therefore, reached an agreement with Prince Eugene, the acting governor of Milan, permitting the import of foodstuffs and salt from the Novarese to continue as before. He reported that prices were excessive and smuggling was rife.⁹ Meanwhile, the question of the Val Sesia's commercial relations with the Piedmontese hinterland remained to be determined. In theory the inhabitants of the valley, as subjects of the duke, were now free to trade with the other Savoyard territories, but this trade did not take off because the old commercial barriers remained in place. Adjustment to Savoyard rule would be a slow process. The economic integration of the Val Sesia into the Savoyard state would only be completed in 1738, when Novara and its territory were added to the Savoyard domains by the Treaty of Vienna.

In response to his sovereign's habitual desire for detailed information on the lands he ruled, Pralormo compiled a lengthy report on the Val Sesia, its institutions, its leading families, and its resources. The report provides a snapshot of life in the valley at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Relying on figures provided by the parish clergy, Pralormo estimated — optimistically — that the total population numbered 49,900 souls, of whom 7,550 were men of military age. Varallo was the largest town, with a population of 4,800. This figure may be too low: a modern estimate gives a total population of 7,316 for Varallo and its surrounding district at this time. Pralormo placed Borgosesia next, with a population of 3,600. These two towns, and the next largest — Campertogno and Cellio — accounted for about a third of the entire population of the Val Sesia, reflecting the relative importance of commerce and artisanal production in the valley's economy, compared with agriculture.¹⁰

Pralormo's estimate was much too high. The next census figures we possess show that in the early 1760s the valley's population stood at 35,413. Through the following decades, until the French revolutionary wars, it would remain roughly stable, although Alagna and the upper region of the valley registered a decrease. This pattern of stability runs counter to the upward demographic trend observable in northern Italy in the eighteenth century, and confirms that the Val Sesia was a self-regulating demographic system whose internal equilibrium was principally maintained by late marriage and seasonal migration.¹¹

⁹ Rizzi, *Storia della Valsesia*, pp. 306–08.

¹⁰ Viazzo, 'L'evoluzione della popolazione della Valsesia', p. 124; Peco, *Il mutamento di dominio*, pp. 156–59.

¹¹ Fassola, *La Valle Sesia descritta*, IV, pt 7, p. 124; Garavaglia, 'Varallo Sesia negli "Status Animarum" di metà Settecento'.

Pralormo reported that the valley's notables were concentrated in Varallo, where he counted thirteen important families, headed by the d'Adda; at Borgosesia he listed only five, and in each of the minor communities he counted only one or two families of any significance. All in all, he reckoned that the valley's elite consisted of about forty families. He also commented on the proliferation of lawyers and notaries, whose numbers he judged to be far beyond what the valley needed. Varallo boasted six doctors of the law who monopolized the pleading of legal cases. Its College of Notaries, founded in 1646, had no less than twenty-two members, and Pralormo counted at least sixty notaries for the valley as a whole. All were licensed to practice their profession after a perfunctory examination by the head of the college.¹²

Pralormo's task of managing the transition to Savoyard rule was complicated by the long dispute between Victor Amadeus II and Pope Clement XI. It had begun when the previous pope had condemned the duke's granting of an edict of toleration in 1694 to the small Protestant minority in his state, and then expanded into a conflict over clerical appointments and revenues from vacant benefices.¹³ Shortly after Pralormo arrived in the valley, the death of a parish priest raised the question of who would appoint his replacement. The battlelines were immediately drawn. Two local priests, encouraged by Bishop Visconti of Novara, an ardent partisan of the papacy, whipped up popular feelings against Victor Amadeus because of his supposed refusal to respect papal authority. For his part, Victor Amadeus claimed that the choice of the new priest rested with the *economo* of the valley, the official who administered the revenues of vacant benefices.¹⁴ Pralormo had just appointed a new *economo*, but Bishop Visconti refused to recognize him and summoned him, along with Pralormo, to appear before his court. Predictably, they refused, and as more priests died the dispute escalated, each side seeking to fill the vacancies with its own candidates. The bishop issued excommunications (but suspended them) against officials who tried to install their candidates and against any priests who accepted benefices from them.

The conflict between the duke and the bishop of Novara opened a rift among the Val Sesia's clergy: some chose to follow Pralormo and the *economo*, some obeyed the bishop. One of the latter was Benedetto Giacobini, the provost of

¹² Peco, *Il mutamento di dominio*, pp. 153, 156–58.

¹³ Prolo, 'L'economato della Valsesia', pp. 112–141. See also the instructions on church affairs to the Savoyard officials in the Val Sesia, AST, Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m. 2, no. 13.

¹⁴ Dell'Oro, 'I benefici ecclesiastici in Valsesia dal 1415 al 1714', pp. 210–17.

the collegiate church of San Gaudenzio at Varallo. The great historian Ludovico Antonio Muratori (1672–1750) wrote a short biography of him, celebrating his exemplary qualities: his personal integrity, his care for the poor, his profound piety. Giacobini was born into a poor family at Fobello in the Mastallone valley above Varallo. His brothers were masons and painters who migrated in search of work; as a youth he travelled with them to Nancy in Lorraine, where he first felt his calling to the religious life. Soon afterwards he accompanied his elder brother, a painter, to Aosta, and there he would remain for six years, studying for the priesthood. He was ordained by the bishop of Novara in 1676, and a year later was appointed to the parish of Cressa in the Novarese. The people of the village did not welcome him at first, but he gradually won their confidence through his diligent pastoral care, his preaching, and his charitable work. He also conducted sessions of the Spiritual Exercises for the clergy of the surrounding parishes, establishing a reputation for personal piety and asceticism. In January 1705 the bishop of Novara appointed him provost of the canons of San Gaudenzio in Varallo, with jurisdiction over the valley's clergy. He left his flock at Cressa reluctantly and assumed his new duties in Varallo, preaching, patching up relations with the Reformed Observants of Santa Maria delle Grazie, and leading regular sessions of the Spiritual Exercises. He initiated an ambitious programme to reconstruct his church, San Gaudenzio, by raising money from donors like the princess of Masserano and Varallo's elite families, led by the Alberganti. The work would continue for much of the century, giving the church the form it has today.¹⁵

As the conflict between the Savoyard authorities and the pope reached its climax, Giacobini refused to obey the orders of the *pretore* and the *economo*, and departed into a brief voluntary exile, returning in September 1711. By this point Clement XI was ready to reach a settlement because he was embroiled in a dispute with Emperor Joseph I, whose forces invaded and occupied part of the papal states. Victor Amadeus, meanwhile, secured the support of the Senate of Milan, which had always upheld the state's jurisdictional rights in conflicts between the clergy and the Spanish monarchy. He also dispatched several Capuchin preachers to the Val Sesia with orders to win over the populace. On 12 September 1712 the pope capitulated. He issued a brief endorsing the right

¹⁵ Muratori, *La Vita dell'umile servo di Dio Benedetto Giacobini*, ed. by Stoppa. Muratori met Giacobini only once, in 1699, but retained a powerful recollection of him; see Mongini and Tortarolo, 'Benedetto Giacobini (1650–1732)', pp. 398–400. Cf. Migliore, 'Giacobini, Benedetto Ludovico'. On his rebuilding of the church of San Gaudenzio, see Cagna and Pomi, *La Collegiata di San Gaudenzio a Varallo*, pp. 27–29.

of the *pretore* of the Val Sesia to appoint the *economo*, and in November the bishop of Novara lifted the excommunications of Victor Amadeus's officials. In August next year Bishop Visconti died, and a more compliant successor took over the see of Novara; from this time, relations between the bishop and the authorities in Turin would remain harmonious.¹⁶ Giacobini's firm adherence to principle during the dispute had won him the admiration of Victor Amadeus, who offered him a bishopric. He declined, preferring to remain as provost of the Val Sesia. He died at Varallo on 1 April 1732. Muratori's biography, which would make him famous as the ideal of the humble, upright, devoted priest, was published twenty years later.¹⁷

Meanwhile Victor Amadeus consolidated his authority over the the Val Sesia. He declared himself the official protector of the Sacro Monte, had his arms inscribed over the entrance, and ordered the annual celebration of the feast-day commemorating his victory at the battle of Turin in 1706, due to the intervention of the Virgin.¹⁸ And in 1713 the Treaty of Utrecht, which ended the War of Spanish Succession, awarded him the kingdom of Sicily, elevating him to royal rank. In 1721 the major European powers compelled him to exchange it for the less valuable kingdom of Sardinia, but he retained his royal title and his place among the crowned heads of Europe.

Completing the Sacro Monte

In the later seventeenth century the pace of work on the Sacro Monte slackened. The era of creativity inspired by Bishop Bascapè and led by Giovanni d'Enrico had come to an end. In part this was because the sanctuary's sequence of chapels was now close to completion, but the lower level of building activity was also the result of extraneous factors: the famines and economic depression in the closing decades of the century, the rebellion of 1678 and the ensuing political turmoil, and two decades of war in Lombardy after 1690. Regional trade was interrupted, local resources contracted, and pilgrims were deterred from journeying to Varallo and making offerings. Nonetheless, work on the

¹⁶ Prolo, 'L'economato della Valle Sesia', pp. 128–41.

¹⁷ Mongini and Tortarolo, 'Benedetto Giacobini', pp. 392–401, argue that Muratori presented Giacobini as an enlightened Catholic like himself by minimizing his less 'enlightened' qualities, characteristic of an earlier era: his asceticism, his belief in prophecy, and his devotion to the cult of saints.

¹⁸ Cozzo, 'Culti e spazi sacri nella Valsesia di età moderna', pp. 255–58.

basilica of the Virgin proceeded gradually, and the chapel of the Transfiguration (no. 17) was completed.

This chapel, on the hillock Caimi had named Mount Tabor, is one of the most imposing structures on the Sacro Monte. Its circular plan derives from Alessi's original design, with the addition of a tall portico over the opening through which pilgrims viewed the mystery.¹⁹ It received its complement of figures in the 1670s: three kneeling disciples gaze up at Christ, who is surrounded by billowing clouds and flanked by Moses and the prophet Elijah. The figures are the work of two local sculptors, Pietro Francesco Petera of Varallo and Gaudenzio (or Giovanni) Soldo of Camasco, who had worked with the Milanese sculptor Dionigi Bussola.²⁰ The heavenly hierarchy in the dome above them was painted by the brothers Giovanni Stefano (1612–89) and Giuseppe Doneda (1609–89), known as the 'Montalti' from their birthplace near Bergamo.²¹ Giovanni Stefano may have spent some years in Rome during the 1640s. He established his reputation working in Milan and other Lombard cities, in a style recalling Morazzone's. His brother Giuseppe is less well known. The Transfiguration chapel was not their only commission at Varallo; between 1665 and 1671 they painted the ceiling in the recently completed choir of the basilica.

In 1703 an oratory was built abutting onto the Holy Sepulchre, on the site of the original hermitage, which had fallen into disuse. The d'Adda brothers, Giorgio (1638–1706) and Gerolamo Maria (1652–1704), financed its construction. To allow the worshippers in the oratory to view the tomb of Christ, an opening was cut in the wall of the Sepulchre.²² In a space next to the oratory a statue of Carlo Borromeo, sculpted by Giuseppe Arrigoni in 1722, commemorated the saint's last visit to the Sacro Monte. The statue was moved to its present site in a chapel constructed next to the oratory in 1945.²³

The pace of work began to pick up after the fighting ended in Lombardy, and with the consolidation of the Savoyard administration in the Val Sesia. The first sign of renewed activity was the erection of an arch, the Porta Aurea, as

¹⁹ Alessi's drawings for this chapel are in Alessi, *Libro dei Misteri*, ed. by Stefani Perrone, I, fols 88–96.

²⁰ Debiaggi, *Dizionario degli artisti valesiani*, pp. 135, 163. Bussola (c. 1615–87) was the leading sculptor working in the region at this time.

²¹ Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, pp. 97–98; De Filippis, *Guida*, p. 29; cf. Bona Castellotti, 'Doneda, Giovanni Stefano, detto il Montalto' and 'Doneda, Giuseppe, detto il Montalto'.

²² Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, pp. 251–52; Cometti, 'La committenza della famiglia d'Adda', p. 293.

²³ De Filippis, *Guida*, p. 134.

the entrance to the two piazzas at the top of the hill. It represented the gateway through which Christ made his entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and marked the line of demarcation between the lower chapels depicting his ministry, and the chapels on the top of the hill representing the Passion. The arch, a baroque structure crowned by a broken pediment, was designed by a local architect, Giovanni Battista Morondi of Varallo (1700–70), and was constructed between 1725 and 1749. It was decorated with frescoes — today almost illegible — by Bartolomeo Borsetti (1698–*c.* 1759), from Boccioleto, who produced a large volume of work for churches in the Val Sesia, at Orta, and at Macugnaga in the Val d'Ossola.²⁴

Morondi may also have designed the last of the chapels on the Sacro Monte, Christ before the High Priest Annas (no. 24), which completed the sequence planned more than a century earlier by Bishop Bascapè. The building was constructed in the Piazza dei Tribunali between 1737 and 1740, its cost defrayed by the Valsesians living in Turin. In 1763 it received its complement of statues, by Carlo Antonio Tantardini, from the neighbouring Valsassina. Attended by guards, Christ stands submissively before the high priest enthroned on a dais. The throne was modelled a few years later by the Savoyard court sculptor Giovanni Battista Bernero (1736–96). The simulated alcove behind Annas's throne and the spectators and soldiers lining the walls were painted by Sigismondo Betti (1699–post 1777), a teacher at the Florentine Academy.²⁵ The authorship of the works in the chapel, by artists not linked to the Val Sesia, can probably be read as a sign of the Savoyard sovereigns' influence, as patrons of the Sacro Monte.

The sequence of chapels was now complete. It was slightly reordered in 1776 following the construction of a portico along the north side of the Piazza della Basilica, facing the Fountain of the Risen Christ. The figures depicting the Last Supper and the Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane (nos 20 and 21) were moved from their original chapels and placed in new chapels aligned under the portico.²⁶ This rearrangement was made necessary by the demolition three years earlier of the old church dedicated to the Virgin, on the topmost point of the hill, to make way for a new building for the Spiritual Exercises. (It is now the pilgrim hostel.) The chapel of the Last Supper now occupied its correct place

²⁴ On Borsetti and Morondi, see Debiaggi, *Dizionario degli artisti valesiani*, pp. 23–24, 119–20.

²⁵ De Filippis, *Guida*, p. 93; Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, pp. 104, 122; Stefani Perrone, 'Varallo', p. 163.

²⁶ Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, pp. 107–17; De Filippis, *Guida*, pp. 82–87.

between the Porta Aurea and the Agony in the Garden. The original figures, made of wooden armatures robed in gessoed cloth, were arranged at a table in the new chapel, with a copious banquet set out on elegant platters in front of them, and a new background in a distinctly rococo style by Antonio Orgiazzi the Elder of Varallo (1725/30–c. 1790).²⁷

The portico sheltering the Last Supper and the adjoining chapel of Christ Praying in the Garden of Gethsemane (no. 21) was reconfigured in the nineteenth century. In 1816 the Marchioness of Parella had a summer residence built for herself behind the portico. In 1863 the residence and the portico were extended, and a new chapel depicting Christ Waking the Sleeping Disciples (no. 22) was added next to Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. The figures for this chapel, modelled by Giovanni d'Enrico, were moved from their former location in a chapel on Mount Tabor. Thus, finally, they occupied their correct sequential position in the history of the Passion.²⁸ The arrangement of the chapels on the Sacro Monte was now in the form in which we see it today (see Appendix 2).

The most significant artistic development in the eighteenth century, however, was the completion of the basilica of the Virgin, the crowning edifice of the Sacro Monte. After the image of the Sleeping Virgin was installed in the choir in 1649, the new basilica became the culmination of the pilgrims' progress, with important spiritual implications. The Christocentric schema established by Caimi and so dear to Carlo Borromeo was now paralleled by the theme of Marian devotion, shifting the devotional focus of the Sacro Monte, and reflecting the millennial diffusion of the cult of the Virgin throughout the Val Sesia.²⁹

At the time when the basilica was consecrated in 1649, only the choir was finished and open for worship. Decades of work were still required to decorate the choir, build the nave and its side-chapels, and excavate the crypt (*scurolo*), in which the figure of the Virgin was to repose. In 1662 the *fabbricieri* commissioned the renowned Milanese sculptor Dionigi Bussola (c. 1615–87) to decorate the dome that formed the end of the choir. Early in his career he had left Milan for Rome, where he trained in the workshop of the Lombard sculptor Ercole Ferrata, and was able to study the work of Bernini, then at the

²⁷ Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, p. 267. The figures are attributed to the De Donati brothers, from the beginning of the sixteenth century. On Orgiazzi, see Debiaggi, *Dizionario degli artisti valsesiani*, p. 127.

²⁸ De Filippis, *Guida*, p. 86.

²⁹ Baldissone and Scanzio, 'La Valsesia "cultrice di pietà e di Belle Arti"', pp. 305–06.



Figure 6.1. Chapel of the Last Supper, Sacro Monte of Varallo.
Photo by the author, courtesy of the Ente di Gestione dei Sacri Monti, Varallo.

height of his powers. Bussola returned to Milan in 1645 and joined the cathedral workshop. In the course of his career he produced an impressive volume of work: at the Certosa of Pavia and the Sacri Monti at Orta, Domodossola, and Varese, in addition to his work at Varallo. For the dome of the Basilica of the Virgin he and his assistants, led by his son Cesare, created a scenographic array of modelled saints and angels — eventually 142 in all — deployed in ascending circles around the lower register of the dome, escorting the Virgin on her ascent to Paradise; here Bussola was perhaps following the model of the Ascent of the Virgin that Tabacchetti had created at Crea half a century earlier. Above Bussola's figures the Doneda brothers painted a panoply of angels in a grand spectacle that leads the eye heavenwards to the sunlight streaming through the lantern crowning the dome.³⁰

Meanwhile construction went ahead on the nave. By 1714 the fabric of the basilica was finished, and its lofty mass (complete except for its façade, added

³⁰ Bussola has not been adequately studied. See Ferri Piccaluga, 'Bussola, Dionigi'; cf. De Filippis, *Guida*, pp. 151–52.



Figure 6.2. Dome of the Basilica, Sacro Monte of Varallo. Interior.
 Photo by the author, courtesy of the Ente di Gestione dei Sacri Monti, Varallo.

a century and a half later) now dominated the piazza in front of it, with the Fountain of the Risen Christ at its centre. The Milanese painter Francesco Leva and a local artist, Carlo Penna of Camasco (1673–1740), were commissioned to decorate the vault. Their frescoes were unveiled finally in 1728.³¹ With the nave complete, attention shifted to the main altar and the excavation of the crypt beneath it, which was to house the image of the Sleeping Virgin. In 1730 Marco Bianchi, an architect originally from Rome but working in Milan, was commissioned to design the altar and the semicircular *tribuna* of columns behind it. He demolished part of the wall of the choir to accommodate the *tribuna* and the altar, and excavated a space for the crypt, with two flights of stairs leading down to where the Virgin was to lie in an ornamental glass case. By May 1738 everything was complete, and Bishop Giberto Borromeo of Novara came to the Sacro Monte to consecrate the new altar.³²

³¹ De Filippis, *Guida*, p. 138; Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, p. 238; on Penna, see Debiaggi, *Dizionario degli artisti valsesiani*, p. 130.

³² Bellini, *Benedetto Alfieri*, p. 136.



Figure 6.3.
High Altar and Tribuna of
the Basilica, Sacro Monte of
Varallo. Photo by the author,
courtesy of the Ente di Gestione
dei Sacri Monti, Varallo.

At this moment, with the altar, crypt, and *tribuna* virtually finished, there was an abrupt change of plans. Although direct evidence is lacking, it appears that the *fabbriciere* Giuseppe d'Adda (d. 1759) found Bianchi's work unsatisfactory and called in the Turinese court architect Benedetto Alfieri (1700–67) to draw up a more impressive design. Once again, the influence of the Val Sesia's new sovereigns seems to have been at work. The high baroque aesthetic of the Savoyard court, the heritage of Filippo Juvarra, now made itself felt at Varallo. Alfieri, scion of an illustrious Piedmontese family, had trained in Rome and had recently returned to Turin. In January 1738 he was appointed chief architect to King Charles Emanuel III. Giuseppe d'Adda, who called him to the Sacro Monte, stemmed from a collateral branch of the d'Adda family, the Salvaterra. In 1705 he united the two branches of the family when he married his cousin Livia, the only daughter of Gerolamo Maria, the last male descendant of



Figure 6.4. Casket of the Virgin Mary in the Crypt, Sacro Monte of Varallo.



Figure 6.5. Glass Canopy over the Virgin Mary in the Crypt, Sacro Monte of Varallo.
Photos by the author, courtesy of the Ente di Gestione dei Sacri Monti, Varallo.

Giacomo d'Adda and Francesca Scarognini.³³ As *fabbriciere* he maintained his family's traditional role as the chief patrons of the Sacro Monte.

The redesign of the altar in the basilica was the result of close collaboration between these two aristocrats, d'Adda and Alfieri. Work proceeded rapidly. Payments to the contractors in 1739 and 1740 indicate that extensive work was carried out to execute the design that Alfieri and d'Adda had agreed on 'for adapting the *tribuna*, steps, balustrade, and for other operations in the main church.'³⁴ The scale of the work can be gauged from its cost: the impressive sum of 8,500 *lire*. Alfieri's intervention radically transformed not only the altar and *tribuna*, but the crypt as well, welding them together into a single dramatic ensemble, a brilliant *coup de théâtre*. Above the case enclosing the recumbent figure of the Virgin in the crypt, Alfieri placed a conical glass enclosure pointing up into the dome, located immediately behind the altar and encircled by the columns of the *tribuna*. This masterly *concetto* illuminated the recumbent Virgin in the crypt, and guided the eyes of the pilgrims in the crypt upwards to her ascent towards heaven, accompanied by angels bathed in the light flooding down through the dome.³⁵

Enlightened Absolutism versus Ancient Privilege

When he took possession of the Val Sesia in 1707, Victor Amadeus II confirmed its privileges — perhaps reluctantly — 'in the same form as they were under the late kings of Spain and the Emperor'.³⁶ The valley's traditional legal and administrative structures were to remain in place, except that the *pretore* — soon to be magniloquently styled 'Gran Pretore' — would now be appointed by the sovereign in Turin, and would be selected from the ranks of the Savoyard magistracy. Otherwise Victor Amadeus was content to leave the valley's laws and institutions alone. He did not extend his new law code, the Royal Constitutions of 1723, or its second iteration in 1729, to the Val Sesia, in contrast to the other newly acquired provinces in Lombardy and Monferrato, where it became the law of the land. In the long run, however, the semi-autonomy of the Val Sesia as a

³³ See the genealogical tables in Leydi, 1808–2008, *Causa pia D'Adda*, II. This branch of the family became the d'Adda Salvaterra.

³⁴ '[...] per l'adattazione della Tribuna, scalinata, Balaustra et altri operationi nella Chiesa principale'; Contract of 2 April 1740 (?), cited by Bellini, *Benedetto Alfieri*, p.136.

³⁵ Bellini, *Benedetto Alfieri*, pp. 136–38, dates the payment to 2 April 1740.

³⁶ Piemontino, 'La Valsesia', pp. 29–30.

terra separata would prove to be incompatible with the centralizing principles of Savoyard absolutism. The issue of the valley's privileges became a matter of concern to Victor Amadeus's successor, as he worked to tighten central control and establish administrative uniformity throughout his heterogeneous domains.³⁷

Victor Amadeus II, no friend of representative assemblies, seems to have looked askance at the authority wielded by the General Council of the Val Sesia, so it is no surprise that he instructed the commandant of the Val Sesia in May 1712 to limit its meetings to a single session per year, instead of the traditional two.³⁸ The duke perhaps intended to avoid direct confrontation with the council and allow it to fade away quietly. But at the same time, paradoxically, he insisted that the council must live by its established procedures, that the rules governing elections must be scrupulously followed, and that only the 'most able' and public-spirited candidates were to be elected to it.³⁹ He probably intended in this way to counter the corruption that had been a cause of the revolt in 1678, and to undercut the ascendancy that the Alberganti exercised over the council. From this time, it would gradually atrophy. Its sessions grew more infrequent, and in many years it did not convene at all. In accordance with the project of centralizing bureaucratic reform the Savoyard rulers were pursuing, its authority was increasingly assumed by the *pretore*.⁴⁰

The question of the Val Sesia's privileges surfaced anew when Victor Amadeus's son Charles Emanuel III succeeded him in 1730. Perhaps prompted by his imperious chief minister, the Marquis d'Ormea, the new sovereign broke the precedent followed by all his predecessors since the Visconti dukes of Milan and omitted to confirm the valley's privileges. The outbreak of war with the Habsburg rulers of Milan in 1733 prolonged the ensuing legal limbo and provided a pretext for the king to postpone the customary confirmation. The treaty that ended the war in 1738 awarded the province of Novara, separated from the Val Sesia in 1707, to Charles Emanuel, and in order to reintegrate Novara with the Val Sesia he decreed that the valley should be free to import grain from the Novarese, as in the past.⁴¹

³⁷ De Franco, 'La Valsesia negli Stati sabaudi', p. 131.

³⁸ Orders for Cav. Carlino, Commandante, 23 May 1712, AST, Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m. 2, no. 13.

³⁹ Order to *podestà* Andrea Barberis, 13 June 1713, AST, Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m. 1, no. 12.

⁴⁰ Garavaglia, 'I Savoia e la Valsesia', pp. 47–50.

⁴¹ 'Biglietto', 16 January 1737, AST, Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m. 2, no. 30; cf. Cognasso, *Storia di Novara*, pp. 456–57.

The regents of the Val Sesia now renewed their request that he confirm their privileges, so in November 1738 Ormea instructed the *pretore* to compile a report on the valley's privileges, fiscal immunities, and legal procedures. The *pretore* conducted a thorough investigation, based in part on secret information obtained by bribing a person with access to the regents' archive. Copies of his report were sent to the advocate general and the procurator general in Turin.⁴² They concluded that the privileges granted by the dukes of Milan did not exempt the Valsesians from paying extraordinary levies or from billeting troops when the need arose. Presented with this verdict, however, Charles Emanuel temporized: no changes were to be made to the valley's privileges for the present, and the report was to be kept secret, for possible use at a later date.

In October 1740 the advocate general, Ludovico Dani, wrote a response to the regents' request for confirmation of the Val Sesia's privileges.⁴³ He found no historical proof of the Valsesians' claim to a contractual relationship with their sovereign deriving from a voluntary act of dedition, and concluded that they had always been the *subjects* of their rulers. (We might note parenthetically that his argument was historically correct. Duke Giangaleazzo Visconti and his son Filippo Maria acted unilaterally in approving the statutes of the Val Sesia as part of their reorganization of the duchy of Milan after 1395.⁴⁴) Charles Emanuel III was therefore not bound by any contractual obligation to the people of the Val Sesia: he was their absolute sovereign. Dani proposed that the king should confirm the valley's privileges only in general terms, without entering into specifics, and that he was free to promulgate reforms as he saw fit. Charles Emanuel did not respond to the regents' request that he confirm the valley's privileges, but neither did he abrogate them, calculating that a confrontation was not worth the scanty benefits it might bring, and his involvement in the war in Lombardy between 1743 and 1748 provided a further pretext for delay.

The question remained in suspense, but it did not go away. In 1759, even though the king still had not guaranteed their privileges, the representatives of the Val Sesia swore fealty to him, perhaps hoping to force the issue. When once again he failed to respond, they commissioned a celebrated Turinese lawyer to

⁴² 'Relazione [...] del Prefetto Lanza', 30 May and 28 November 1740, with attached documents, AST, Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m. 3, no. 3; 'Parere dell'Avvocato, e Procuratore Generali Gallo, e Maystre', 4 January 1740, AST, Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m. 1 d'addizione, no. 2; De Franco, 'La Valsesia negli Stati sabaudi', p. 138.

⁴³ 'Parere dell'Avvocato Generale Dani', 20 October 1740, AST, Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m. 3, no. 2.

⁴⁴ Rizzi, *Storia della Valsesia*, pp. 164–80.

draw up a defence of the valley's privileged status.⁴⁵ This document was duly examined by Charles Emanuel's legal officials, led by the chancellor, Marquis Carlo Caissotti. They tiptoed around the central question, the validity of the privileges the Valsesians claimed to have enjoyed since the fourteenth century, merely observing that these privileges did not contravene the principles of *buon governo* that guided Charles Emanuel's enlightened rule. Caissotti concluded that the king was free 'to make use of these privileges, as he may deem opportune, both for his royal service, and for the public good'.⁴⁶ In other words, the king and his ministers, perhaps mindful of the resistance they were encountering at that time in their efforts to abolish the Estates and the Conseil des Commis of the Val d'Aosta, decided as before that their best course was not to confront the Val Sesia's privileges head-on, but to circumvent or ignore them.⁴⁷

Finally, in July 1761, the king issued a formal confirmation of the valley's privileges.⁴⁸ He and his ministers evidently regarded confirmation as a mere formality, of no practical significance: to them, the privileges were an archaic survival from a less enlightened era, destined to fade quietly into oblivion as they were superseded by modern, rational governance. Caissotti's decision that the valley's privileges were compatible with enlightened administration opened the way for a series of piecemeal initiatives. One was a draft plan to conserve the valley's forests, threatened by indiscriminate cutting to open up pastureland and fuel the metal-smelting plants that were supposedly generating 'considerable benefits for the inhabitants'.⁴⁹ This proposal for reform, although it may not have been implemented, was related to the government's efforts to revive the iron mines at Alagna by sending in hundreds of soldiers to work there, and by encouraging private entrepreneurs to open up more mines. In the mid-eighteenth century there were at least five mines in the Val Sesia producing gold and silver, as well as iron.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, in a further reforming measure, the crown

⁴⁵ 'Discorso Istorico', AST, Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m. 1 d'addizione, no. 3. Its author was Lodovico Ottaviano Chianale; Rizzi, *Storia della Valsesia*, p. 323; De Franco, 'La Valsesia negli Stati sabaudi', pp. 140–41.

⁴⁶ 'Sentimento del Congresso', 5 February 1759, and 'Relazione Storica', 17 August 1760, with letter by Caissotti, 23 August 1760, AST, Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m. 4, nos 11 and 13.

⁴⁷ The Conseil des Commis was the permanent executive committee of the Estates of the Val d'Aosta. From 1748 Charles Emanuel III gradually reduced its membership. It no longer convened after 1766.

⁴⁸ Garavaglia, 'I Savoia e la Valsesia', p. 49.

⁴⁹ 'Progetto d'Editto', 1760, AST, Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m. 4, no. 15.

⁵⁰ Rizzi, *Storia della Valsesia*, pp. 320–23; Viazzo, *Upland Communities*, pp. 160–62.

ordered the establishment of an archive for notarial documents, or *insinuazione*, to bring the Val Sesia into line with the rest of the state.⁵¹

The government's next initiative was to extend the tobacco tax to the Val Sesia, aiming to establish fiscal uniformity between the valley and the other Savoyard territories, where the tax had been levied since 1752. It immediately ran into stiff opposition. In September 1761 subversive leaflets appeared in Varallo, and groups of armed men protested against the tax — stirred up, according to the *pretore*, by the town's notaries. The disorder soon spread to other parts of the valley. Early in December a 'tumultuous' meeting of the General Council voted to remove the regents, for their 'betrayal' in accepting the new tax, and to replace them with men who would stand up for the valley's privileges. The government in Turin reacted firmly. It declared the council's vote invalid, exiled the leaders of the opposition, and ordered the ousted regents reinstated. The council complied and sent three representatives to 'prostrate themselves' before the king and ask his pardon. Calm was restored.⁵² In this trial of strength the king had won.

Nevertheless, Charles Emanuel and his chief minister Count Giambattista Bogino (born, according to tradition, at Cravagliana in the Val Mastallone) continued to tread cautiously, pressing ahead with limited reforms to remedy what they deemed 'abuses', while avoiding any overt challenge to the valley's privileges. They did not extend the land-tax survey or *Perequazione*, initiated by Victor Amadeus II and at that time covering almost the entire Savoyard state, to the Val Sesia. In 1770, when Charles Emanuel issued a revised version of the state law-code, the Royal Constitutions, the Val Sesia was given special exemptions. The Constitutions superseded the valley's civil and criminal laws to bring them into line with the rest of the state, but did not alter its institutions. The *pretore* was not replaced by an intendant, as the Constitutions stipulated for the rest of the state, in direct contrast to the imposition of an intendant two years later in the Val d'Aosta.⁵³ Nor was the Val Sesia included in the municipal reform edict promulgated in 1775 by Charles Emanuel's successor Victor Amadeus III, which reduced all the municipalities in the Savoyard state to a

⁵¹ 'Ordini', 17 August 1760, AST, Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m. 4, no. 16.

⁵² 'Editto', 12 August 1761, in *Raccolta*, ed. by Duboin and others, 24/26, pp. 140–142; 'Scritture riguardanti varij torbidi...', September 1761–February 1763, AST, Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m. 4, no. 17; cf. De Franco, 'La Valsesia negli Stati sabaudi', pp. 142–43.

⁵³ Soffietti, 'La lunga durata degli statuti di Borgosesia', p. 100; Costamagna, 'Pour une histoire de l'Intendenza', pp. 392–94.

standard pattern.⁵⁴ It seems that, apart from the promulgation of the new version of the Royal Constitutions in 1770, the Savoyard administrative monarchy decided to leave the Val Sesia's institutions alone, judging that there was little to gain through innovation. Despite this slow erosion of its privileges, under Savoyard rule the valley remained what it had always been: a *terra separata*.

Savoyard reformism extended to cultural affairs. In 1778, Victor Amadeus III issued an edict with important implications for the future: he founded an academy at Varallo to train local youths in the art of drawing, with two Valsesian artists, first Rocco Orgiazzi (d. 1799), and then his pupil Giovanni Avondo (1763–1829), as directors. The purpose of the academy was to develop the artistic traditions that had flourished for centuries in the Val Sesia. In the next century similar institutions would follow in its wake: in 1831 the Society for the Encouragement of Drawing (*Società per l'Incoraggiamento del Disegno*); in 1836 an academy of sculpture; in 1878 an institute for artistic conservation.⁵⁵

In the end, therefore, Savoyard absolutism had only a limited impact on the Val Sesia. For the king and his ministers in Turin it remained a peripheral zone, both geographically and politically. In one area, however, they intervened decisively, as their enlightened principles dictated: they expelled the troublesome Reformed Observant Brothers from the Sacro Monte and replaced them with a community of secular clergy.

The Reformed Brothers Depart

When Bishop Bascapè banished the disreputable Observant Franciscans from Varallo in 1603 and installed the Reformed Observants in their place, he hoped that the newcomers would set an example of probity and piety for the valley's inhabitants and the pilgrims who came to the Sacro Monte. Bascapè's hopes were not fulfilled, however, for although the Reformed Observants did not engage in criminal acts like their predecessors, they proved even more contentious. They quickly became embroiled in disputes with the *fabbricieri* and the *vicinanza* of Varallo, with the bishop of Novara, and with the parish clergy.

⁵⁴ 'Parere' by Intendente Generale Canova, undated, AST, Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m. 4, no. 18. The edict on municipal reform, 6 June 1775, is in *Raccolta*, ed. by Duboin and others, 9/11, 598–665.

⁵⁵ Rizzi, *Storia della Valsesia*, p. 374; De Filippis, 'Il Sacro Monte di Varallo Sesia', p. 148. On Avondo, see Debiaggi, *Dizionario degli artisti valsesiani*, p. 7.

The points of contention between the Reformed Observantx and the *fabbricieri* were all-too familiar — the division of the alms donated by the faithful, the placement of the collection boxes, the procedure for the election of the *fabbricieri*, jurisdiction over the physical fabric of the Sacro Monte. The Brothers also struck out in a new direction: they contested the authority of the bishops of Novara over the sanctuary, and their rights of visitation. They were also in conflict with the parish clergy, who resented the Brothers' infringement of their pastoral duties, and the loss of emoluments this entailed. Against these adversaries the Brothers not only defended what they held to be their rights but strove to extend them, in a war on several fronts. In the end, their combativeness proved counterproductive: it led to their isolation, and eventually to their expulsion from the Sacro Monte. Their different opponents joined forces, and after the Val Sesia passed under Savoyard rule these adversaries enjoyed the sympathy and support of the king and his ministers, and the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Savoyard state.

The perennial quarrel over the collection boxes flared up again in 1635. The bishop of Novara ordered the Brothers to remove a box they had placed in the church on the Sacro Monte, and reaffirmed the existing rules for sharing the alms collected from the pilgrims. The papal Curia then became involved in the dispute. In an attempt at an even-handed agreement, it decreed a settlement granting the *fabbricieri* control over the pilgrims' offerings — now much diminished 'because of these calamitous times' — while stipulating that a sufficient portion of the money should be allotted to the Reformed Observants.⁵⁶ Another dispute then arose: the *fabbricieri* refused to hand over the keys of the chapels on the Sacro Monte, claiming that the Brothers had no right to inspect them. They retorted by demanding that the bishop of Novara excommunicate the *fabbricieri* for this affront; he refused, so the Brothers took their case to the Senate in Milan. The Senate found in favour of the *fabbricieri* and instructed the Spanish ambassador in Rome to intercede on their behalf at the papal Curia.⁵⁷ In October 1647 the bishop of Novara decreed a new settlement in the question of the collection boxes and reaffirmed his authority over both the

⁵⁶ 'Ordini' by Bishop Volpi, 15 June 1635, ASV, Sacro Monte, m. 2; 'Lettera del [...] Cardinale Francesco Barberini', 29 Ap. 1637; 'Altra lettera [...]', 29 May 1638; 'Scomunica' by the bishop of Novara, 10 March 1639, BRT MP, 3 (1), nos 18–20. Cf. Chiara, *Storia*, fols 38–48; Tonetti, *Storia della Vallesesia*, p. 577.

⁵⁷ 'Lettera scritta dall'Eccellentissimo Senato di Milano al Sig. Ambasciatore Cattolico in Roma [...]', 18 June 1643, BRT MP, C 36 31, no. 11; Longo, 'Fonti documentarie', pp. 98–104.

Reformed Observants and the *fabbricieri*, in accordance with the papal brief of 1587.⁵⁸ His orders produced no effect: the squabbling continued.

Meanwhile, the Reformed Observants were opening a new front in their battle with the *fabbricieri*. Reviving the argument their predecessors had put forward a century earlier, based on a reading of the transfer deed of 1493, they claimed they were the outright owners of the Sacro Monte, and that consequently the *vicinanza* and the *fabbricieri* had no authority there.⁵⁹ In one limited sense their argument was correct: the document made no mention of the office of the *fabbricieri*, which was established decades after the foundation. But the Reformed Observants chose to ignore the unequivocal statement in the deed that the *vicinanza* retained ownership of the monastery and the Sacro Monte. The Reformed Observants' claim was probably intended to serve an ulterior purpose: if they were the legal owners of the Sacro Monte, they could deny the bishop of Novara any jurisdiction over the sanctuary, invalidating the papal brief of 1587. Ultimately, pursuing this claim proved fruitless, as it had in the past; it only inflamed their relations with the *fabbricieri* and the bishop.

The Reformed Observants were also at loggerheads with the parish clergy. The Brothers refused to permit them to celebrate mass in the new basilica, contrary to the rules laid down by the *fabbricieri*.⁶⁰ In 1650 this dispute ended up before the Senate in Milan, which rejected the Brothers' claims and ruled that the secular clergy had a limited right to celebrate mass in the basilica, after the Assumption Day procession and on the feast day of Saint Luke. Significantly, too, as part of its ruling the Senate ordered that no bandits were to live on the Sacro Monte, suggesting that peace and order did not always reign there.⁶¹ The Senate's order was reissued several times, without effect: the conflict persisted. In 1670 some priests, carrying weapons, caused a disturbance on the Sacro Monte; others protested against the 'innovations' the Reformed Observants were supposedly instituting there.⁶² Lorenzo Ravelli, one of the founders and first provost of the college of canons at the church of San Gaudenzio, journeyed

⁵⁸ 'Concordia inter D. D. Antonium Torniellum Episcopum Novariensem, et Fratres Reformatos Sancti Francisci...', 5 Oct. 1647, BRT MP, 3 (1), no. 21; Chiara, *Storia*, fols 221–224.

⁵⁹ Chiara, *Storia*, fols 207–222.

⁶⁰ 'Copia della Protesta [...] fatta dalli Signori Fabricieri [...]', 8 September 1649, BRT MP, C 36 31, no. 9; Chiara, *Storia*, fol. 227.

⁶¹ 'Capi decisi dall'Ill.mo Sig. Senator Patellano [...]', 15 March 1650, BRT MP, C 36 31, no. 13; Chiara, *Storia*, fols 48–49.

⁶² See the Senatorial decrees, 1650–1690, BRT MP, 3 (1), no. 28.

to Rome at his own expense, hoping to achieve a settlement, but in vain. The Reformed Observants accused him and certain other priests of invading the basilica of the Virgin in an attempt to celebrate mass there, with the connivance of the *fabbricieri*. The Brothers took their case to the papal Curia, which ruled that the secular clergy could not celebrate mass on the Sacro Monte. Ravelli abandoned his efforts at reconciliation and resigned his canonry in disgust.⁶³

When some years later Benedetto Giacobini became the provost of San Gaudenzio, one of his first tasks was to mediate yet another dispute between the Reformed Observant Brothers and the parish clergy, this time over their respective rights to officiate at funerals and other religious functions. Through patient negotiation, he managed to reach an accommodation with the guardian of their monastery.⁶⁴ Predictably, however, the settlement did not last, for by now the rift between the Reformed Observants and the secular clergy had become unbridgeable.

The constant squabbling between the Reformed Observants, the *fabbricieri*, the bishop, and the parish clergy would have been public knowledge in Varallo, and all over the Val Sesia too. But the strife does not seem to have discouraged the flow of pilgrims, judging by the continuing publication of guide-books for the Sacro Monte. One was a reprint, published at far-away Bassano in 1726, of a lengthy, detailed work originally published at Varallo.⁶⁵ It gave a description of each of the chapels, with sonnets to aid the pilgrims in their devotions, notes on the artists who had modelled the figures and painted the frescoes, and a history of the sanctuary from its foundation. In 1740 a completely new guide-book was published at Varallo, dedicated to its illustrious patron, Giuseppe d'Adda.⁶⁶ The dedication praised his recent achievement in completing the

⁶³ 'Sententia', 10 March 1687, BRT MP, 3 (1), no. 23; Tonetti, *Museo storico e artistico valsesiano*, III, pt 9, 73–75. The college of canons of San Gaudenzio was founded in 1669: ASV, Museo Calderini, m. 13, no. 10. It was occupied by members of prominent families. Giovanni Battista Fassola was one of the original canons.

⁶⁴ Muratori, *La Vita dell'umile servo di Dio Benedetto Giacobini*, ed. by Stoppa, p. 29.

⁶⁵ *Direttorio per ben visitare la Nuova Gerusalemme o sia il S. Sepolcro di Varallo* (1726). It is apparently a revised edition, with additions by the Reformed Observant Giovanni Battista da Grignasco, of the *Direttorio per ben visitare la Nuova Gerusalemme, o sia il Santo Sepolcro di Varallo, e per ben contemplare li alti Misteri della Vita, Passione, Morte, e Resurrezione del Nostro Signor Gesù Christo*, published in 1704 and 1706 at Milan. It was republished in 1737 at Milan.

⁶⁶ *La Nuova Gerusalemme o sia Il S. Sepolcro di Varallo-Sesia: con la descrizione istorica di ciascuna Capella, Mistero, e Luogo[...]* (1740).

altar and crypt of the basilica, crowning the efforts of his ancestors who had built and beautified the sanctuary. The book lists the chapels in sequence, with the artists who had created them. The author concludes by praising the work of the present directors of the sanctuary and reporting that many miracles were occurring there.

After the Savoyard government assumed sovereignty over the Val Sesia, it was inevitably drawn into the disputes between the Reformed Observants and the *fabbricieri*. In 1712, following a complaint from the latter, Victor Amadeus II ordered two of his chief officials to investigate. Their recommendations covered familiar ground: there must be separate collection boxes, each with two sets of keys, and an inventory of the objects donated to the Sacro Monte must be compiled each year. Hoping to ease the tensions between the Reformed Observants and the secular clergy, they also proposed restricting the Brothers' right to celebrate feast days in the basilica to a single date, the feast of the founder, Bernardino Caimi. Their recommendations were incorporated into a new set of rules for the administration of the Sacro Monte, which Victor Amadeus ordered the commandant of the Val Sesia to enforce.⁶⁷

Despite this new regulation, the wrangling continued. In 1724 the *fabbricieri* protested that the Brothers were again claiming ownership of the sanctuary, and were posting a tertiary of their order on the Sacro Monte to solicit offerings from the pilgrims, siphoning off money that should have gone into the collection boxes.⁶⁸ Another enquiry followed, without result, and the dispute dragged on. In 1743 the *fabbricieri* protested that the Reformed Observants were once again challenging their authority over the Sacro Monte, reviving the argument that because the *fabbricieri* did not figure in the original deed of transfer, they had no jurisdiction over the sanctuary.⁶⁹ The *vicinanza* responded with an ominous new proposal that shifted the terms of the dispute and foreshadowed things to come: because of the 'great discord' the Reformed Observants were causing, and the heavy legal costs this entailed, they should be removed from the Sacro Monte and replaced by a community of secular clergy

⁶⁷ 'Ristretto delle lettere', 1713, AST, Corte, PNA, Valle di Sesia, m. 2, no. 13; undated report by Cavaliere Moretti and Senatore Graneri, BRT MP, C 36 31, no. 16; draft of 'Provvedimenti Reali', 1712, ASV, Sacro Monte, m. 3; Chiara, *Storia*, fols 466–69.

⁶⁸ Report by Abate Lauriano, 26 October 1724, AST, Corte, Inv. 79, Luoghi Pii di quà, e di là da' Monti (henceforth AST, Corte, LP), m. 23, Varallo, no. 6.

⁶⁹ AST, Corte, LP, m. 23, Varallo, no. 7. This bundle of documents includes memoranda and reports on the dispute from c. 1747 onward.

like the one at Oropa.⁷⁰ The *vicinanza* also began to foment popular opposition to the Reformed Observants. When the General Council of the valley convened at Varallo in 1747, some of the deputies and townspeople (perhaps drunk) roamed the streets shouting: 'Out with the Brothers from the Sacro Monte! Let's all go up there to kick them out, and if they don't want to go, we'll throw them off the cliff!' The Brothers petitioned Turin for protection.⁷¹

At this critical moment the embattled Reformed Observants committed the grave error of antagonizing the bishop of Novara, Ignazio Rovero di Sanseverino. Early in 1749 he announced that he would conduct a visitation of the Sacro Monte, and that he intended to administer the sacraments in the basilica. The Reformed Observants objected that since he was not conducting his visit in his capacity as *delegato apostolico*, but merely as *ordinario*, he could not enter the sanctuary.⁷² He therefore secured an authorization from the government in Turin and proceeded with the visitation. On 13 August he arrived at Varallo and was welcomed by the *vicinanza* and the guardian of the Reformed Observants. He conducted his visitations of the Sacro Monte on 14 and 15 August, and concluded by celebrating mass in the basilica, attended by several secular priests. The Reformed Observants protested at what they held to be a breach of protocol. Bishop Sanseverino returned to the Sacro Monte two weeks later, inspected the chapels, and gave instructions to the *fabbricieri* for repairs and improvements. Recriminations again ensued. The Reformed Observants protested to their General Chapter in Milan that the bishop's visitation contravened the authority they claimed over the Sacro Monte; he retaliated by taking his case to the secretary of the interior at Turin.

The bishop could count on the secretary's support. The Concordat of 1727 between the Savoyard monarchy and the papacy had confirmed the crown's right to appoint the higher clergy, subject to pro forma approval by the pope, so that bishops were now effectively royal appointees. This created a close alignment between the episcopate and the government, transforming the bishops into higher functionaries of the state administration, exercising their moral authority to maintain order and obedience in their dioceses.⁷³ When Novara

⁷⁰ Copy of minutes of the meeting of the *vicinanza*, 20 March 1747, AST, Corte, LP, m. 23, Varallo, no. 10.

⁷¹ 'Via i Frati dal Sacro Monte, andiamo su tutti a scacciargli, e se non vogliono cedere, gli butteremo giù dalla rupe!'; Chiara, *Storia*, fol. 394.

⁷² Chiara, *Storia*, fol. 419.

⁷³ Silvestrini, *La politica della religione*, pp. 295–301, 322.

was added to the Savoyard domains in 1738 the crown's right of appointment was extended to its bishopric. The convergence of political and ecclesiastical authority isolated the Reformed Observants still further, for the bishop of Novara was now backed by the full weight of government authority. In 1757 a new bishop, Marco Aurelio Balbis Bertone, was elevated to the see.⁷⁴ A conscientious prelate who espoused the reforming Jansenist principles then gaining ground among some segments of the Savoyard clergy, he was no friend of the monastic orders. Crown and bishop now joined forces against the Reformed Observant Brothers of Varallo. And as if this were not enough, popular hostility to them was also intensifying, perhaps aided and abetted by members of the *vicinanza*. During the Pentecost procession in May 1750, a shot was fired from the residence of the Alberganti, wounding one of the Brothers.⁷⁵

They now realized they were isolated: they had succeeded in alienating not only the *vicinanza* and citizens of Varallo, but the local clergy, the bishop of Novara, and the government of Charles Emanuel III as well. In a desperate, ill-considered move they made a secret appeal to the French court, through the intermediary of an Italian merchant residing in Paris, hoping to persuade Louis XV's pious queen to intercede with the authorities in Turin on their behalf. Their gamble failed. The queen did not intervene, and word of the intrigue leaked out, arousing the ire of the king and his ministers.⁷⁶ Charles Emanuel now decided to settle matters once and for all. In September 1762 he issued a new set of regulations for the Sacro Monte, with the stated purpose of restoring good governance by balancing the authority of the Reformed Observants and the *fabbricieri* within the 'just limits of their functions'.⁷⁷

The guardian of the Reformed Observant monastery, however, chose to reject this regulation, and put forward a startling alternative. Pleading the 'constant troubles' the Brothers were suffering at the hands of the secular clergy and the *fabbricieri*, he requested permission for them to change their living arrangements: the little group living in the hospice on the Sacro Monte would leave

⁷⁴ Silvestrini, *La politica della religione*, pp. 326–27.

⁷⁵ Chiara, *Storia*, fols 418–41, 692–93; the bishop's letters describing his visit are in AST, Corte, Lettere Diverse della R. Casa, Lettere di Vescovi (henceforth AST, Corte, Lettere Vescovi), Novara, m. 73.

⁷⁶ Chiara, *Storia*, fols 785–87.

⁷⁷ '[...] ciascuno ne' giusti limiti delle sue funzioni [...]'; 'Biglietto' to Pretore, 10 September 1762, conveying 'Stabilimenti' by Caissotti, August 1762, AST, Corte, LP, m. 23, Varallo, no. 11; draft of the 'Provvidenze Regie' for the community of secular priests, 17 July 1765, ASV, Sacro Monte, m. 3.

the sanctuary and join their brethren in the monastery at the bottom of the hill. This bishop of Novara and the parish clergy welcomed this proposal, and Pope Clement XIII gave his assent.⁷⁸ The government too welcomed the plan, because it offered a chance to end the turmoil on the Sacro Monte by replacing the Reformed Observants with a community of secular priests like the one at Oropa. This type of community would be more obedient to the bishop and more compliant in its dealings with the *fabbricieri* and the *vicinanza*.

In May 1765 Charles Emanuel gave his consent for the Reformed Observants to leave the Sacro Monte. In July he promulgated regulations for the secular priests who were to replace them, and for the administration of the Sacro Monte in general.⁷⁹ A few days before the regulation was issued, the last of the Brothers departed from the hospice on the Sacro Monte, watched by the *fabbricieri*, the *pretore* and several priests, and followed by a jeering crowd.⁸⁰

The story did not end here, however. On 18 July the king decreed that the Reformed Observant community at Santa Maria delle Grazie must be reduced from thirty-three Brothers to twelve, plus three lay assistants.⁸¹ This order came in response to the pleas of the bishop of Novara and the *vicinanza*, which argued that the cost of sustaining the monastery was too high for the people of Varallo to support. In a broader sense, this regulation was just the latest round in the jurisdictional struggle between the Savoyard monarchy and the Church since the reign of Victor Amadeus II, and an expression of the attitude of Enlightened regimes toward the monastic orders. To cite some parallels: the abolition of the Jesuits forced on Pope Clement XIV by the Catholic monarchs in 1773, the utilitarian critiques of the contemplative religious orders by Emperor Joseph II, or the radical reform of the Church in Tuscany by his brother, Grand Duke Leopold. Charles Emanuel III's reform of the Sacro Monte sprang from the same source. According to these Enlightened sovereigns, religious orders that did not serve a social function like teaching or poor relief should be radically reformed, or abolished — particularly if, like the Reformed Observants of Varallo, they disturbed the public peace.

⁷⁸ The negotiations can be followed in 'Scritture riguardanti la rimossione de' PP. Minori [...]', 1763–66, AST, Corte, LP, m. 23, Varallo, no. 10; cf. Chiara, *Storia*, fols 813–20.

⁷⁹ See the printed 'Provvidenze Regie per il buon regime, e governo del Sacro Monte di Varallo', 17 July 1765, ASV, Sacro Monte, m. 3.

⁸⁰ Chiara, *Storia*, fol. 872.

⁸¹ 'Biglietto', 18 July 1765; Order, 18 July 1765, and correspondence relating to the removal of the Reformed Observants, February to October 1765, are in AST, Corte, LP, Varallo, m. 10. Cf. Chiara, *Storia*, fol. 873.

Confronted by this threat, the head of the Reformed Observant Province of Milan protested that the reduction would leave too few Brothers to carry out their spiritual duties at Santa Maria delle Grazie. Bishop Balbis Bertone of Novara disagreed: in his view, they did little to minister to the spiritual needs of the people of Varallo, and the parish clergy were well able to do this on their own. The Brothers' removal from the Sacro Monte and the reduction in their numbers were positive steps that would restore public tranquillity and improve the spiritual climate of the sanctuary, long bedevilled by their intrigues.⁸² The guardian and the provincial minister protested, but in vain. By the beginning of 1767 the complement of Brothers at Santa Maria delle Grazie had been whittled down to the required number.

The royal regulation of 1765 completely transformed the administration of the Sacro Monte, giving it a distinctly secular structure, as the principles of *buon governo* required. The regulation made no mention of the foundation document of 1493, or the papal brief of 1587 that gave the bishop of Novara authority over the Sacro Monte. Instead, it endowed the first president of the Senate of Turin with jurisdiction over the sanctuary, as its protector, with the *pretore* of Varallo as his local representative. The six priests who replaced the Reformed Observant Brothers on the Sacro Monte were given the title of 'Chaplain', under a rector and vice-rector whom they would elect among themselves. The chaplains were to be appointed in the first instance by the Crown, and after that, by the *vicinanza*. The sanctuary was to be administered by a committee composed of the *pretore*, the two *fabbricieri* and the treasurer, the bishop's *vicario foraneo*, the rector and vice-rector of the chaplains, and two representatives of the *vicinanza*. Voting would be by simple majority, and the secular representatives outnumbered the clerics. The rest of the regulation covered familiar ground: there were to be separate collection boxes with separate sets of keys for the *fabbricieri* and the chaplains; offerings were to be counted regularly; accounts were to be kept by the treasurer. As before, the *fabbricieri* were in charge of the physical fabric of the sanctuary and were to be elected by the *vicinanza* for two-year terms. The chaplains were enjoined to live together in harmony and perform their duties conscientiously. They were expressly instructed to allow other priests to celebrate mass in the basilica.

It soon became clear that the bishop's belief that the chaplains would be able to minister to the visitors to the Sacro Monte was unduly sanguine: they were

⁸² Balbis Bertone to Seg. Interno, 3 June 1766, AST, Corte, Lettere vescovi, Novara, m. 73, no. 28.

too few. On a visit to the Sacro Monte soon after they were installed, Bishop Balbis Bertone discovered a lengthy backlog of masses that had been paid for but not yet celebrated, indicating that more priests were needed.⁸³ Soon afterwards, the *vicinanza* complained that the chaplains were not celebrating divine services as they were required and that the faithful who came to the sanctuary were dissatisfied. But the complement of chaplains did not increase, probably because the funds to support a larger community were lacking. The reform of 1765 had not achieved its intended result; the Reformed Observant Brothers were gone, but a void remained in the spiritual life of the Sacro Monte.

Their exodus marked a caesura in the history of the Sacro Monte, severing the link to the Franciscan spirituality that had inspired its foundation, its aesthetics, and its devotional system. The sanctuary's development as a great monument of Christian art, begun in the partnership between Bernardino Caimi and Milano Scarognini, had ended in an acrimonious parting of the ways between their latter-day representatives, which was finally settled by royal decree. This state's decisive intervention in the affairs of the Sacro Monte, hitherto subject only to the bishop of Novara and ultimately to the pope, marked the end of an epoch.

⁸³ Same to same, 13 August 1769, AST, Corte, Lettere vescovi, Novara, m. 73, no. 29.

VARALLO AS MODEL: THE LATER SACRI MONTI

The Sacri Monti as a System?

A century after Bernardino Caimi founded the Sacro Monte at Varallo, a new generation of sanctuaries inspired by it started to appear in the western Italian Alps. The resulting network of Sacri Monti is a cultural artefact specific to the region, without equivalents elsewhere in the Italian peninsula. In 2003 UNESCO recognized nine of these sanctuaries as World Heritage Sites, but omitted a few sanctuaries in the area, presumably because they were judged to be of lesser artistic significance. These other sanctuaries should be considered as Sacri Monti, however, because they are the products of the same religious and cultural impulses that gave rise to the sites chosen by UNESCO.

Varallo's fame made it the inspiration for the new generation of sanctuaries. They followed its model of a didactic sequence of chapels peopled with full-size figures, displayed in chapels that broadly followed the pattern established by Galeazzo Alessi: variations of a central plan, with late Mannerist colonnaded porticoes.¹ But the inspiration for the new generation of Sacri Monti sprang from a different root: the militant Counter-Reformation values propagated in the archdiocese of Milan by Archbishop Carlo Borromeo and, later, his cousin Federico.² It has been argued that Carlo Borromeo conceived the chain of Sacri Monti as a spiritual barrier against the threat of Protestantism from across the

¹ Comolli Mandracci, 'Il Sistema dei Sacri Monti', pp. 84–85.

² Ghiffa and Crea were neither Franciscan nor Capuchin foundations. Nor were Graglia and Arona.

Alps. But this overstates the case.³ Carlo Borromeo was deeply concerned that Protestantism might spread into his archdiocese from the Swiss Cantons, and he conducted several visitations of the alpine valleys close to the Swiss frontier to assess the danger.⁴ There is no evidence, however, that he planned to construct a chain of spiritual bastions along the subalpine chain to counter the inroads of Protestantism. The later Sacri Monti were not elements in a Borromean master plan but were the results of separate local initiatives spanning more than a century. And they did not serve so much as a barrier against the inroads of heresy, but rather as instruments through which the Counter-Reformation clergy sought to canalize and discipline popular devotion.⁵

It is thus incorrect to say that the Sacri Monti were consciously designed to form a bulwark against Protestantism, and that Carlo Borromeo was in some way the moving spirit behind them. He did much to foster the ardent forms of Catholicism that inspired them, but the chronology of their development disproves the notion that he was directly involved in their planning and their construction. In actual fact they were the piecemeal products of separate local initiatives. Varallo, the prototype, had been established a quarter-century before Luther published his Ninety-Five Theses. The first of the new wave of sanctuaries, the Sacro Monte at Orta was founded a century later, one year before Borromeo's death; he played no part in its creation. Some, like Ossuccio, Crea, Oropa, and Belmonte, had existed as Marian shrines since the Middle Ages. The original sanctuaries at Varese and Ghiffa also predate the Counter-Reformation. Arona, Graglia, and Domodossola were the only shrines created *ex novo* during this period. In short, although the movement of Catholic renewal embodied in the charismatic figure of Carlo Borromeo may have inspired this second generation of sanctuaries, he played no part in their creation, nor were they conceived as a unified system.

By the end of the sixteenth century contemporaries were starting to visualize Varallo as the focus of a 'geography of pilgrimage'.⁶ Bishop Bascapè had the

³ Zardin, 'I Sacri Monti e la cultura religiosa e artistica dell'Italia moderna', pp. 43–44; Debiaggi, 'Sacro Monte di Varallo', p. 251; Pomi, *La parola si fa arte*, pp. 88–89; Longo, *Memorie di Gerusalemme*, p. 57; Gentile, 'Imitazione dei luoghi ed evocazione dei "misteri"', p. 40.

⁴ Giussano, *The Life of St Charles Borromeo*, I, 175–80, 282–84; II, 195–99, 205–13.

⁵ 'Non sembra, poi, esistere, come spesso si ripete, un progetto di Sacri Monti piemontesi e lombardi, solo una realtà di santuari rinnovati alla fine del xv secolo e alla fine del xvi secolo [...] indipendenti o con relazioni create *ex post* [...]'; Longo, 'I Sacri Monti novaresi tra devozione e società', p. 585.

⁶ Gentile, 'I misteri mariani del Sacro Monte di Crea dal Trattato di Costantino Massino', p. 88.

roads between Orta and Varallo improved to facilitate the movement of pilgrims between the two sanctuaries. A generation later, the author of a treatise on the four Sacri Monti of Arona, Varallo, Orta, and Varese presented them as a single devotional — but not defensive — system. Its outer poles were Varallo and Varese, dedicated to Christ and the Virgin, enclosing in their spiritual embrace the sanctuaries dedicated to saints, Orta and Arona.⁷ But only retrospectively would they and the other sanctuaries in the region come to be viewed as a single system designed as a barrier against the infiltration of heresy. A survey of their origins and divergent paths of development will demonstrate this point.

Orta

The Sacro Monte at Orta, founded in 1583, is the first in the wave of new Sacri Monti. Like Varallo it was designed as a sequence of chapels that tells a story, in this instance the life of Saint Francis of Assisi.⁸ Like Varallo, Orta was a Franciscan foundation and like Varallo, it began life as a municipal initiative, but with a critical difference: at Orta there was no counterpart to the catalysing figure of Bernardino Caimi.

The little town of Orta is located on the eastern shore of the lake of the same name, north-west of Milan in the pre-Alps. Through the Middle Ages it was under the jurisdiction of the canons of San Giulio, who resided on the island in the middle of the lake. During the sixteenth century the town prospered, thanks to its position on a commercial route between the Lombard plain and the alpine passes, and to the money brought home by its craftsmen and traders who, like their counterparts from the Val Sesia, migrated far afield in search of work. Buoyed by this modest prosperity, and perhaps seeking to assert their independence from the canons of San Giulio, the communal council of Orta voted in 1582 to build a new town hall facing the piazza. In a further expression of rising civic pride, the council voted a year later to found a Sacro Monte of its own, emulating — or competing with — the *vicinanza* of Varallo.⁹

Orta's council decided to build their Sacro Monte on the hill overlooking the town, above the old church of San Nicolao da Mira, in a site of great natural beauty with a panorama over the lake. The council presumably expected that, like the Sacro Monte at Varallo, their foundation would attract pilgrims and

⁷ Longo, *Memorie di Gerusalemme*, pp. 80–82, citing Manino, *Descrittione de' Sacri Monti*.

⁸ Its official name was *Fabrica Misteriorum Vitae Sancti Francisci Montis Sancti Nicolai*.

⁹ Mattioli Carcano, 'Il Sacro Monte di San Francesco a Orta', p. 152.

enhance their town's prestige. Pilgrims were already coming to worship at the shrines of Orta's local saints, San Giulio and San Nicolao, and to venerate an old statue of the Virgin in the church of San Nicolao, which in 1538 had been observed to move, sweat, and weep.¹⁰ The council originally intended to entrust the new sanctuary to the Observant Franciscans, who already maintained a small residence in the town, but news of the friction between the Observants and the *fabbricieri* at Varallo led some leading citizens and the canons of San Giulio to grant the new foundation instead to the Capuchins, another offshoot of the Franciscan order which had received papal approval in 1528. In May 1587 the town council voted to take this step, the bishop of Novara gave his approval, and in 1590 the Provincial Chapter of the Capuchins voted to establish a community at Orta. In October of that year the bishop of Novara laid the foundation stone for their monastery on the hill above the town, on land leased from the municipality.¹¹ And taking their cue from the *vicinanza* of Varallo, the town council established a committee of *fabbricieri* to direct the construction of the Sacro Monte.¹²

The foundation was celebrated with a procession of Orta's townspeople and notables, headed by Amico Canobio (1532–92), the scion of a rich family of landowners, merchants, and moneylenders from Novara.¹³ As a younger son he had been destined for the Church; he took minor orders in 1556 and entered the papal Curia, rising to the position of chamberlain. In 1565 he returned to his native city as abbot of the Vallombrosan monastery, acquired the office of commissioner for the secular lands held by the Church in the diocese, and founded the Monte di Pietà, the charity that granted loans to the poor. When his elder brother died in 1570 he inherited the family fortune, and on his death it would pass to his illegitimate son, Giovanni Agostino. Because of his close ties to the canons of San Giulio, Canobio took the lead in establishing Orta's Sacro Monte. His intervention recalls the pivotal role played by Milano

¹⁰ The notary Elia Olina recorded that it was seen to 'sudare, cambiare colore, aprire e chiudere gli occhi', cited by De Filippis, 'Orta', p. 105; Stoppa, 'Tempi, ambienti e uomini alle origini del Sacro Monte d'Orta', pp. 57–59.

¹¹ Mattioli Carcano, 'Il Sacro Monte di San Francesco a Orta', pp. 153–54; Melzi d'Eril, 'Sacro Monte d'Orta', p. 107.

¹² The date is uncertain; Bascapè established it in 1593, according to De Filippis, 'Bascapè e il Sacro Monte di Orta', p. 308. He drafted its regulations in 1595; Longo, *Memorie di Gerusalemme*, pp. 155, 171–72.

¹³ Di Paoli, 'Amico Canobio, protagonista della Novara del '500'; Melzi d'Eril, 'Sacro Monte d'Orta', pp. 108–10.

Scarognini at Varallo, and his motives may have been similar: like Scarognini, he had sins to expiate and a desire to commemorate his name through a pious benefaction. He had visited Varallo in 1588 and would have been inspired by what he saw there.¹⁴

To initiate the construction of the Sacro Monte at Orta, Canobio commissioned three chapels dedicated to Saint Francis, the founder of the order from which the Capuchins derived. The guiding theme of the sequence of chapels was the parallelism between the lives of Christ and Saint Francis, following Bonaventura's and later Franciscan biographies of the saint that portrayed him as *imitator Christi* or *alter Christus*.¹⁵ This parallelism was made crystal clear in the very first chapel, which not only placed the birth of Saint Francis in a stable, as at Bethlehem, but also displayed a painting of the Nativity by Procaccini above the portal through which pilgrims viewed the scene.¹⁶

In October 1591 Bishop Ponzone of Novara came to Orta and laid the foundation stone for the first of Canobio's three chapels (no. 18), which was to represent the tomb of Saint Francis.¹⁷ Adjoining it were the sites destined for his two other chapels, one representing the saint's miracles (no. 19) and the other, his canonization (no. 20). At the same time another chapel, depicting Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata (no. 15), was commissioned by Giulio Antonio Maffioli, a wealthy banker from Orta who lived in Rome. Its circular plan recalls Bramante's Tempietto at San Pietro in Montorio in Rome. Next year two other chapels, one dedicated to the Confirmation of the Franciscan Rule by Innocent III (no. 7), and the other depicting the birth of Saint Francis (no. 1), were commissioned respectively by the people from Orta living in Rome, and by the terracotta artists and tinsmiths from Orta working in France and Spain.¹⁸

Canobio's original schema for the Sacro Monte envisioned thirty-two, or perhaps thirty-six chapels; these eventually dwindled to the twenty we see today. The architect of the monastery and the first nine (or perhaps twelve)

¹⁴ *Libri di Fabbriceria*, ed. by Longo and Mattioli Carcano, p. 22.

¹⁵ Notably the *Liber Conformitatum* of Bartolomeo da Rinonico, the *Cronache* of Marco of Lisbon and the life of the saint by Saint Bonaventure; Longo, *Memorie di Gerusalemme*, p. 156.

¹⁶ Longo, *Memorie di Gerusalemme*, p. 165; De Filippis, 'Orta', p. 116. The chapel was built 1592–1600.

¹⁷ Melzi d'Eril, 'Sacro Monte d'Orta', p. 107; Mattioli Carcano, 'Il Sacro Monte di San Francesco a Orta', p. 154.

¹⁸ Mattioli Carcano, 'Il Sacro Monte di San Francesco a Orta', p. 155; Melzi d'Eril, 'Sacro Monte d'Orta', pp. 112–15; Mallé, *Il Sacro Monte di Orta*, p. 12.

chapels was a Capuchin, Brother Cleto da Castelletto Ticino (1556–1619). He was a pupil of Pellegrino Tibaldi, Carlo Borromeo's favourite architect, and had received training as an 'engineer' before taking his Capuchin vows.¹⁹ He served both as a preacher and as one of the four architects serving his order's province of Lombardy. Besides his work at Orta, he provided designs and supervised construction for a number of parish churches and Capuchin monasteries across the region.

Amico Canobio died in 1592, bequeathing an annual revenue of 630 *lire* to fund the construction of the Sacro Monte. The next year Carlo Bascapè, newly consecrated bishop of Novara, came to Orta on his first episcopal visitation and took charge of the project, asserting his right to supervise every detail of the Sacro Monte's construction, as at Varallo.²⁰ He appointed Brother Cleto as his agent and expert adviser, and commissioned him to design a chapel depicting Saint Francis renouncing his worldly goods (no. 3).²¹ Bascapè laid its foundation stone in 1596, and it was completed in 1611. Inside, Saint Francis, clad only in his penitential hair-shirt, kneels before the tall figure of the bishop — supposedly a portrait of Bascapè. Priests and attendants gaze in wonder, and the bishop extends his hand in blessing.²²

Under Bascapè's leadership, work on the Sacro Monte at Orta progressed quickly. In 1594 construction began on the second of the chapels commissioned by Canobio: the Canonization of Saint Francis (no. 20). In 1606 an anonymous donor commissioned the chapel depicting the Vocation of Saint Francis (no. 2), and a local notable, Dr Giovanni Antonio Martelli, commissioned a chapel representing the Granting of the Indulgence for the Church of the Porziuncula (no. 11). (Bascapè had urged Martelli to make this pious gesture to atone for his concubinage with a local woman.²³) In 1602 the church

¹⁹ Melzi d'Eril, 'Sacro Monte d'Orta', p. 107; Merelli, 'P. Cleto da Castelletto Ticino († 1619)'; Mattioli Carcano, 'Il Sacro Monte di San Francesco a Orta', p. 156, credits Cleto with chapels 1–5, 11, 12, 15, and 18–20. Melzi d'Eril, 'Il Sacro Monte d'Orta', p. 108, credits him with chapels 1–5, 15, and 18–20.

²⁰ See his decree, 26 November 1593, in Longo, *Memorie di Gerusalemme*, pp. 155, 171. He had already instructed his vicario (12 April 1593) to ensure that the money from Canobio's legacy was not diverted by his heir; Melzi d'Eril, 'Sacro Monte d'Orta', p. 110.

²¹ On Bascapè's relations with Cleto, see Merelli, 'Carlo Bascapè e i frati cappuccini di Orta', pp. 346–50.

²² This follows the description by Bonaventura; see Bonaventura, *The Life of Saint Francis*, trans. by Salter, pp. 17–18.

²³ Melzi d'Eril, 'Sacro Monte d'Orta', pp. 120, 154.



Figure 7.1. Francis before the Bishop of Novara. Sacro Monte of Orta, Chapel 3.
Photo by Alamy Ltd.

of San Nicolao next to the Capuchin monastery was rebuilt ‘alla moderna’ to Cleto’s design. The banker Giulio Maffioli, who had already commissioned the chapel of the Stigmata (no. 15), donated funds to pay for its vault, and Martelli bequeathed his fortune to ensure the church’s completion.²⁴ In 1609 work started on another chapel, Saint Francis Hearing Mass at the Church of the Porziuncula (no. 4), then two years later, on the chapel of the Robing of Saint Francis’s Companions (no. 5). This was the last of the chapels certainly designed by Brother Cleto. In April 1606, he drew up a master plan for the sanctuary at Bascapè’s orders, laying out the sequence of chapels and the pathway connecting them, with a fountain at the centre.²⁵

Several of the artists and sculptors who decorated these chapels had worked at Varallo. One of them was Michele Prestinari’s son Cristoforo (c. 1570–1623), whom Bascapè summoned to model the figures for the chapel he had commissioned. Cristoforo would remain at Orta almost up to his death. He, his brother Marco Antonio, and his assistants produced most of the figures for the Sacro

²⁴ Melzi d’Eril, ‘Sacro Monte d’Orta’, pp. 139, 154.

²⁵ Merelli. ‘P. Cleto da Castelletto Ticino (+1619)’.

Monte during the first phase of its development.²⁶ The della Rovere brothers, who had worked at Varallo, frescoed four of the chapels at Orta between 1607 and 1619.²⁷ In 1615 Morazzone contracted to decorate the chapel representing Christ and the Virgin Granting the Indulgence for the Porziuncula (no. 11). Their crowned figures dominate the chapel; along the walls Morazzone painted Francis kneeling before the crucifix, the pope and his attendants, while brown-robed friars rush to hold up the tottering walls of the Church. This detail is perhaps a reference to Bonaventura's account of how Innocent III approved the rule: the pope dreamt that the Lateran Basilica was collapsing, and that 'the little poor man' was holding it up.²⁸

This first period in the development of the Sacro Monte at Orta closed with the passing of the founding generation: Bascapè died in 1615, Brother Cleto in 1619, and Cristoforo Prestinari in 1623. By then, thirteen chapels were finished or were under construction. To enhance the sanctuary's reputation, the *fabbricieri* ordered the publication of two guide-books and two commemorative engravings.²⁹ The next phase of development began with a new chapel — Saint Francis in the Fiery Chariot (no. 8) — an elegant octagonal building founded about 1624, perhaps designed by Brother Cleto.³⁰ Along the interior wall a line of Franciscans, some standing, some prostrate with amazement, gaze up as the saint is borne through the heavens like the prophet Elijah, in a ponderous chariot drawn by two horses.³¹ The next chapel to be built, the Robing of Saint Claire (no. 9), was founded in 1634; the figures are by Giacomo Ferro, and pos-

²⁶ For details, see De Filippis, 'Orta', pp. 116–27; Melzi d'Eril, 'Sacro Monte d'Orta', pp. 126–30, 139–40.

²⁷ Chapel no. 2, the Crucifix Speaks to Saint Francis (finished 1608); chapel no. 3, Saint Francis Renounces his Worldly Goods (1607); chapel no. 4, Saint Francis at Mass (1614–15); chapel no. 6, the Disciples Sent Forth to Preach (finished by Gian Mauro, 1619); Melzi d'Eril, 'Sacro Monte d'Orta', pp. 131–36, 139, 163.

²⁸ Stoppa, *Pier Francesco Mazzucchelli detto Il Morazzone*, pp. 235–38, 291; the frescoes were completed by a local painter, Gian Filippo Monti, Maffioli's nephew; Melzi d'Eril, 'Sacro Monte d'Orta', pp. 157; Bonaventura, *The Life of Saint Francis*, trans. by Salter, p. 31.

²⁹ Mattioli Carcano, 'Il Sacro Monte di San Francesco a Orta', pp. 160–61. These were Manino's *Descrittione dei Sacri Monti* and P. Egidio da Milano's *Gli spettacoli misteriosi delle serafiche scene che sul Sacro Monte d'Orta rappresentano San Francesco* (1630). A small version of one of the engravings, intended for pilgrims, sold for 5 soldi.

³⁰ The design perhaps derives from Alessi's two octagonal chapels at Varallo, or from Tibaldi's San Carlo al Lazzaretto in Milan.

³¹ Mattioli Carcano, 'Il Sacro Monte di San Francesco', pp. 167–71; De Filippis, 'Orta', p. 121; Mallet, *Il Sacro Monte di Orta*, p. 15. Bonaventura, *The Life of Saint Francis*, trans. by

sibly Giovanni d'Enrico, with later additions by Bussola; the fresco-painter is not known.³² Rosary in hand, the demure figure of Claire kneels before Francis and the priest who blesses her, while a Franciscan stands by holding her new vestments. Behind her, a female figure, probably her mother, holds the dress she had removed in order to receive her new robes. Women cradling their babies look on. The scene takes place in the church of the Porziuncula, painted as a perspective space centring on the alcove of the altar, which frames the figures of Claire, Francis and the attendant friar. Above the altar, the Virgin in heavenly glory presides over Claire's consecration to the religious life.

Chapel no. 10, The Temptation of Saint Francis, was founded in 1640 but was not finished until 1661. The figures are by Bussola, the frescoes by the Milanese painters Carlo Francesco Nuvolone (1609–61) and his brother Giuseppe (1619–1703). Carlo Francesco had probably trained at the Ambrosian Academy in Milan.³³ The chapel depicts the devil tempting the saint to abandon his harshly ascetic way of life, telling him that God will pardon him if he does. Francis conquers temptation by rolling naked in the snow. Three angels beckon him away from temptation, while devils and angels battle for his soul in the sky above. A series of panels on the walls depict the other temptations Francis overcame: a brightly attired courtesan tries to lure him, demons assail him while he prays, the devil throws him down from Mount La Verna but God saves him. Panels in the ceiling depict comparable tests of virtue — Job on the dunghill, Christ tempted by Satan, Tobias victorious over temptation.³⁴

Around this time, the Nuvolone brothers and Bussola collaborated in chapel no. 17, the Death of Saint Francis, perhaps the most poignant of all the tableaux at Orta. In this highly realistic depiction, the pallid, emaciated figure of the saint, his mouth half-open, breathes his last, surrounded by priests and mourners. Fresco panels along the walls amplify the drama: a noblewoman, forewarned

Salter, pp. 35–36, relates that Francis was at Assisi when he appeared in the fiery chariot to the Brothers in a 'deserted hut' outside the city.

³² De Filippis, 'Orta', p. 121; Melzi D'Eril, 'Sacro Monte d'Orta', p. 177. Ferro, *Nuvolone*, p. 229, suggests the painter was probably Martinolio, or perhaps Gian Giacomo Barbelli.

³³ These artists have not been studied in depth. For Bussola, see Ferri Piccaluga, 'Bussola, Dionigi'; for the Nuvolone brothers, see Frangi, 'Nuvolone, Carlo Francesco' and 'Nuvolone, Giuseppe'; cf. Ferro and Dell'Olmo, 'Scheda'.

³⁴ Longo, *Memorie di Gerusalemme*, p. 163; Ferro, *Nuvolone*, p. 229. The account of the temptations is based on the passage in Bonaventura, *The Life of Saint Francis*, trans. by Salter, pp. 44–49.



Figure 7.2. Chapel of the Death of Francis. Sacro Monte of Orta, Chapel 16.
Photo by the author.

in a dream, comes bearing a shroud; the physician attending the saint touches the stigmata and reacts in disbelief; the dying saint blesses his companions, dictates his will, frees souls from Purgatory, and ascends to heaven.³⁵

This same theatricality animates Bussola's statue of Saint Francis above the arch erected in 1648 as the entrance to the Sacro Monte. Flanked by angels sounding trumpets, he spreads his arms wide to welcome the pilgrims.³⁶ But by this time the pace of work was slackening, as the deteriorating economic climate and the fighting in Lombardy combined to discourage the influx of pilgrims. The resultant financial strain was exacerbated by the corruption of the *fabbricieri*, who had taken to treating the Sacro Monte as their own fiefdom. Accounts were not properly kept, rents and debts were not collected, moneys were diverted, properties were sold off. In 1648 Bishop Tornielli intervened to remedy the dis-

³⁵ Ferro, *Nuvolone*, p. 230. Bonaventura, *The Life of St Francis*, trans. by Salter, states that Francis was attended only by the Brothers who were then at the church of the Porziuncula, and that when his body was transported to Assisi for burial the next day, one of his followers (not the physician as depicted in this chapel) touched the wound in his side, like Doubting Thomas, to see if it was real (pp. 152–53, 157).

³⁶ De Filippis, 'Orta', p. 116. The arch was built in 1648, the statue dates from 1666.

order with a new set of rules for the *fabbricieri*, which seem to have produced its intended effect.³⁷ Building gradually resumed on the Sacro Monte.

In two of the chapels built in the later seventeenth century, the sculptor Giuseppe Rusnati (1650–1713) created spectacular crowd scenes, complemented by the frescoes of Antonio Busca (1625–86). Rusnati came from Gallarate near Como, and like Bussola he journeyed to Rome for his training, then returned to Lombardy. He worked at other Sacri Monti — Varese and Domodossola — and at the Certosa di Pavia, ending his career as chief sculptor for the cathedral of Milan in 1693. In chapel no. 13, the Humility of Saint Francis, he and the sculptor Bernardo Falconi modelled the saint being led through a crowd of townsfolk celebrating carnival, a rope around his neck, stripped almost naked in a sign of his humility and his disdain for the frosty season.³⁸ The bustling crowd communicates a feeling of high spirits and curiosity, in contrast to the pain registered on the saint's face and in his bent form, as he walks to the place where he will preach to the crowd, denouncing the excesses of the carnival. In his representation of the Miracles at the Tomb of Saint Francis (no. 19), Rusnati created another animated crowd scene; sick people hoping for a cure are carried to the tomb, while in the background guards with halberds bar the way to other supplicants.³⁹

Bussola, his sons, and his team of assistants modelled a similar dramatic crowd scene in the early 1660s for chapel no. 16, Saint Francis's Return to Assisi. The gaunt figure of the saint — mounted on a donkey, as in Christ's entry into Jerusalem — makes his way through a throng of townspeople.⁴⁰ The everyday atmosphere, with people going about their business and children playing, contrasts jarringly with the saint's obvious feebleness, the sign of his imminent mortality.

Bussola's masterpiece is chapel no. 20, the Canonization of Saint Francis, created in the years before 1678. The ceremony is set in the present; all the

³⁷ Mattioli Carcano, 'Il Sacro Monte di San Francesco a Orta', p. 160.

³⁸ The chapel was commissioned by Costanzo Besozzi, a Milanese nobleman, who became a Capuchin and bequeathed his fortune to pay for it: Melzi d'Eril, 'Sacro Monte d'Orta', p. 209. The frescoes, by the brothers Giovanni Battista and Gerolamo Grandi, and the architectural painter Federico Bianchi, date from 1690 to 1692. The chapel was finished about 1698: De Filippis, 'Orta', p. 123; cf. Bonaventura, *The Life of Saint Francis*, trans. by Salter, pp. 57–58. On Rusnati, see Dose, 'La formazione romana di Giuseppe Rusnati'.

³⁹ Melzi d'Eril, 'Sacro Monte d'Orta', p. 206. The frescoes here are by Busca (1678–82), the figures by Rusnati (1682–84); De Filippis, 'Orta', p. 126.

⁴⁰ The figures date from after 1661; Melzi d'Eril, 'Sacro Monte d'Orta', pp. 190–95.



Figure 7.3. Chapel of the Canonization of Saint Francis. Sacro Monte of Orta, Chapel 20.
Photo by Alamy Ltd.

figures are in contemporary dress trimmed with lace, some with flowing wigs. Seated before the altar of the church, with two Franciscans kneeling in front of him, the pope declares the canonization to two rows of cardinals. It is a bravura display of composition and sculptural skill: the seated cardinals, four on either side of the church, are portrayed as individuals, in varied postures, with beautifully modelled white surplices over their robes. Rows of bishops sit behind them, and behind them stand lines of elegantly dressed noblemen. Two pages run between the lines of cardinals, their animation in sharp contrast to the static figures of the cardinals watching the ceremony unfold. The converging lines of figures draw the spectator's eye to the focal event: the proclamation of Francis's sainthood. Busca's painted architectural background counterpoints the rows of figures.⁴¹ In three simulated archways along each wall he depicts episodes in the saint's life, while to complete the effect, in the domed ceiling, Francis ascends to heaven, where Christ and the Virgin await him. The effect is theatrical, the lesson unmistakable.

⁴¹ Melzi d'Eril, 'Sacro Monte d'Orta', p. 203. Bussola and his son Ottavio received payment on 21 July 1678. The canonization took place at Assisi in 1228: Bonaventura, *The Life of Saint Francis*, trans. by Salter, p. 159.

In 1756 one more chapel was built to fill the last gap in the planned sequence: Francis before the Sultan of Egypt (no. 14). Bonaventura recounts that Francis accompanied the crusading army to Damietta in Egypt in 1218. At some point he crossed into the Muslim camp, where the sultan granted him an audience and asked him why he had come to Egypt. Francis replied that God had sent him to preach the Gospel, and then challenged the sultan's clerics to a trial by fire to test their faith. They declined, leaving him triumphant.⁴² In the scene depicted in the chapel a Muslim cleric withdraws, book in hand, and the sultan's secretary hands Francis a platter of gold coins, which he refuses. The figures, finely modelled by the Lombard sculptor Carlo Beretta, 'Il Berettone' (d. c. 1764), are strongly orientalized, with exaggerated Moorish garb and large turbans. The background frescoes by the Milanese painter Federico Ferrari are suffused with a rococo, Tiepolesque air, opening onto a vista of Francis preaching on the misty seashore at Damietta. One of the panels in the background depicts an American Indian, foretelling the Franciscan missions to the New World.⁴³

About this time the crypt below chapel no. 18, the Tomb of Saint Francis, received its complement of figures, depicting Pope Innocent V's apocryphal visit to the saint's tomb at Assisi in 1440. The sequence of chapels of the Sacro Monte at Orta was now complete. But the story does not quite end here: one more chapel, a large, three-storeyed building extraneous to the sequence, was begun in 1787, to the design of a local architect, Santini di Lagna. This imposing neo-classical structure was to have been dedicated to Saint Francis's Canticle of the Creatures, celebrating his love of the natural world. Its upper storey is a belvedere overlooking the Sacro Monte and the lake. But it was never completed. Work stopped in 1795, in the political and economic chaos of the revolutionary epoch. In 1810 the sanctuary's properties were secularized; the Capuchins were forced to depart, and their monastery passed into private hands. As at Varallo, a new era dawned.

In the nineteenth century tourists began to visit Orta, attracted by the beauty of its location on a pristine alpine lake with its picturesque island, and its Sacro Monte half-hidden among the trees on the hill above. Guide-books began to extol its charms. Travellers from Varallo could traverse the pass to Colma on the western shore of the lake, then take the short boat-trip to the island of San Giulio and the town of Orta, as the Reverend Samuel King and

⁴² Bonaventura, *The Life of Saint Francis*, trans. by Salter, pp. 101–103.

⁴³ Melzi d'Eril, 'Sacro Monte d'Orta', pp. 215–18; Longo, *Memorie di Gerusalemme*, pp. 167–69. On Beretta, see Bossaglia, 'Beretta, Carlo, detto il Berettone'.

his wife did in October 1857. Samuel Butler first visited Orta in 1871 and returned in 1879.⁴⁴ Tourist traffic was greatly facilitated by the opening of the railway line from Novara in 1884. Among the visitors to Orta was an unlikely party composed of Lou Andreas-Salomé, a future disciple of Freud, the aspiring philosopher Paul Rée, and his friend Friedrich Nietzsche. In the summer of 1882 they enjoyed a brief idyll together by the lake. Andreas-Salomé and Nietzsche were 'fascinated' by the Sacro Monte. They lingered longer than they should have among the chapels and incurred the displeasure of Andreas-Salomé's mother, who was chaperoning the party. At some point during their visit, Nietzsche proposed marriage to Andreas-Salomé through the intermediary of Paul Rée. She refused, explaining diplomatically that she was opposed to the idea of marriage. Soon afterwards this strange 'triune alliance' split up, and its members went their separate ways.⁴⁵

Crea

Legend assigns a common origin to the two sanctuaries of Crea and Oropa. The foundation myth linking them recounts how in the mid-fourth century Arian persecution forced Eusebius, the first bishop of Vercelli, to flee to Palestine. When he returned to his diocese, determined to resume his fight against the heretics, he brought with him three images of the Virgin, supposedly carved by Saint Luke. In the course of his battles with the Arians he deposited two of the images in remote hiding-places: one on the hill at Crea in Monferrato, after miraculously cleaving a rock that barred his passage, and the other under a rock high on the mountainside at Oropa, above the city of Biella. (The third image somehow found its way to Cagliari, in Eusebius's native Sardinia.) As the story goes, Eusebius finally vanquished the Arians, and ever since that time the precious images were venerated in the places that had given them shelter.⁴⁶ This theme of orthodox faith vanquishing heresy was well attuned to the confessional conflicts of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, when these two Marian shrines took on their new form as Sacri Monti. But their origin as shrines dedicated to the Virgin, embodied in images of the Black Madonna type found elsewhere along the alpine chain, sets them apart from the Sacro

⁴⁴ King, *The Italian Valleys of the Pennine Alps*, p. 522; Festing Jones, *Samuel Butler*, I, 163, 307.

⁴⁵ Andreas-Salomé, *Looking Back*, pp. 43–44.

⁴⁶ For the legend of Saint Eusebius at Crea, see Andreozzi, *Compendioso Ristretto*, pp. 20–48; for Oropa, see the anonymous *Breve relatione dell'Antichissima*, pp. 23–33.

Monte at Varallo, founded *ex novo* for a very different devotional purpose, and not endowed with a miraculous image.⁴⁷

In the Middle Ages the hilltop at Crea where Eusebius hid one of the images became a shrine attracting local shepherds and pilgrims. By the middle of the twelfth century, there was a church in the 'castrum' on the hilltop, which was entrusted to a community of Augustinian canons from the monastery at Vezzolano in 1176.⁴⁸ At the foot of the hill they built a church and a monastery, which would become the nucleus of the future sanctuary. In 1482 Guglielmo VIII Paleologo, marquis of Monferrato, replaced the Augustinians with a community of Lateran canons; they would serve the sanctuary until its suppression in 1798. He also restored and decorated the church and its two side chapels, one housing the image of the Virgin, the other dedicated to the legendary martyr Saint Margaret of Antioch. The main altar of the church was decorated with a fresco of the Virgin and Child, flanked by devotional portraits of the marquis, his consort, and his daughters, attended by the high officials of his court.

In 1533 the Paleologo dynasty died out, and Monferrato passed to the Gonzaga rulers of Mantua.⁴⁹ In 1587 Duke Vincenzo I (1562–1612) inherited the Gonzaga domains, and in June 1589 he visited the new citadel he was constructing at Casale, near Crea. During his visit he received a proposal to create a Sacro Monte at Crea, imitating Varallo. Its author was Costantino Massino, prior of the Lateran canons at the sanctuary. He proposed that, like Varallo, the new sanctuary should be a sacred space: the carrying of weapons would be banned, and inns forbidden, for Massino's purpose was not simply to create another Sacro Monte, but to discipline the pilgrims who would come to visit it.⁵⁰ The duke agreed to support the plan, hoping his gesture would improve relations with his subjects, who vigorously opposed the building of the citadel at Casale.

On 1 November 1589 an inaugural procession planted crosses to mark the locations for the chapels of the new Sacro Monte along the path to the shrine

⁴⁷ The age and provenance of the image at Crea are uncertain, but it was probably carved by a Piedmontese artist in the mid-thirteenth century. A recent restoration removed the patina and lightened the image's colour.

⁴⁸ Barbero and Spantigati, *Sacro Monte di Crea*, pp. 71–76; Bonardi, 'Crea', p. 30.

⁴⁹ Centini and Moncassoli Tibone, *Tra i prodigi dei Sacri Monti*, pp. 55–56; Negri, *Sanuario di Crea*, pp. 16–30.

⁵⁰ Longo, *Memorie di Gerusalemme*, p. 64.

on the hilltop. Massino originally envisaged a sequence of chapels dedicated to the Rosary leading up to the Coronation of the Virgin at the summit, with a series of hermitages (*romitori*) lining the path down the hill on the other side. The chapels were to serve as ‘historiati libri’ representing the fifteen Mysteries of the Rosary, a form of devotion gaining popularity at this time. The first three chapels were dedicated to Saint Eusebius, making a total of eighteen.⁵¹ Today’s sequence of chapels does not conform to the original plan; after extensive restoration and reordering in the nineteenth century, it comprises twenty-three chapels and five hermitages. The first two chapels now depict the martyrdom of Saint Eusebius, and his pause to rest as he made his way up the hill with the statue of the Virgin. The remainder follow the Rosary, with interpositions.⁵²

In 1590 the first two chapels were founded: they represent the Birth of the Virgin (no. 5 in the present sequence), commissioned by Duke Vincenzo, and the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple (no. 6), declared a feast day by Sixtus V the year before, commissioned by Massino. The figures in the former chapel were modelled by Michele Prestinari, his son Cristoforo, and Melchiorre d’Enrico the Elder; those in the latter are the work of Giovanni Tabacchetti.⁵³ He and his brother Nicola dominated artistic production at Crea for the next decade. Together with Massino’s successor as prior, Tabacchetti drafted a plan to extend the Sacro Monte and bring the total number of chapels to forty, starting with a chapel depicting Adam and Eve like the one at Varallo, on which he had worked a decade before. But this ambitious plan was not carried out, and most of the Tabacchetti brothers’ work has disappeared. One part of it survives, however: the flights of angels bearing the Virgin to her coronation in the dome of the Paradiso chapel (no. 23) at the top of the hill, which they created between about 1604 and 1612. The angelic host is accompanied by a hierarchy of saints and angels painted by Guglielmo Caccia, ‘Il Moncalvo’ (1568–1625).⁵⁴

Most of the chapels at Crea were completed by about 1612, with the support of nearby communities, local clerics, and noble families. The city of Vercelli

⁵¹ Gentile, ‘I misteri mariani del Sacro Monte di Crea: “Quasi historiati libri”’, pp. 170–72; Gentile, ‘I misteri mariani del Sacro Monte di Crea dal Trattato’, pp. 84–85. In 1590 Massino published his *Trattato* outlining the project, which he dedicated to Duke Vincenzo.

⁵² See the list of chapels in Barbero and Spantigati, *Sacro Monte di Crea*, pp. 155–70.

⁵³ Details in Bonardi, ‘La realizzazione del Sacro Monte tra Cinque e Seicento’; Bonardi, ‘Crea’, pp. 42–64.

⁵⁴ On Moncalvo, see Giovanni Romano, ‘Caccia, Guglielmo, detto il Moncalvo’. The figures in the dome have also been attributed to him: Viale Ferrero, *Ritratto di Casale*, unpaginated commentary to pl. XVI; cf. Bava, ‘Artisti e scultori per il “Teatro della Vergine”’, pp. 108–09.

financed the chapel of the Martyrdom of Saint Eusebius (no. 1), and the city of Alessandria financed the Annunciation (no. 8), both started in 1592; and the community of Candia Lomellina paid for the chapel of the Marriage of the Virgin (no. 7). The chapel of the Visitation (no. 9) was commissioned by Fabio Gonzaga, governor of Monferrato; the Immaculate Conception (no. 4), initially financed by Count Onofrio of Gattinara, was completed after his death by his widow Margherita Beccaria di Sartirana, who is beautifully portrayed in the chapel. The Coronation of the Virgin, or Paradiso, was underwritten by the Lateran canons who served the sanctuary. Duke Charles Emanuel of Savoy commissioned a chapel depicting the Embalming of Christ — a clear reference to the relic of the Holy Shroud, the prized possession of his family at Turin — but this chapel has vanished.⁵⁵

This initial burst of activity essentially completed the Sacro Monte at Crea. Schemes for further expansion were halted by the economic crisis that soon overtook the region, exacerbated by outbreaks of plague and the raids of marauding soldiers during the warfare that engulfed Monferrato from 1613 to 1659, and again from 1690 to 1707. The hilltop crowned by the Paradiso chapel was used as a lookout position by the contending armies because of its commanding view over the surrounding countryside. The sanctuary's financial foundations became increasingly shaky, for unlike Varallo, or Orta, it could not call on the support of a local municipality and was wholly dependent on the offerings of pilgrims or the occasional pious bequest. The Lateran canons were able to add a façade to the church in the early eighteenth century, but as time passed money was increasingly lacking, and the chapels and the hermitages gradually fell into disrepair. When sovereignty over Monferrato passed to the House of Savoy in 1707, this change had no discernible effect: in contrast to what transpired at Varallo, the Savoyard rulers evinced no interest in the sanctuary at Crea.

The Sacro Monte at Crea was already faring badly when the French revolutionary armies swept through the region in 1796. Its decline then became precipitous. Two years later, King Charles Emanuel IV ordered the suppression of the Lateran canons and sequestered most of their properties. In December 1801 the Napoleonic regime ordered the sale of its remaining properties. Its library and archives were scattered or destroyed, and a mob rampaged through

⁵⁵ Gentile, 'I misteri mariani del Sacro Monte di Crea: "Quasi historiati libri"', pp. 171–77; Andreozzi, *Compendioso Ristretto*, pp. 72–141, lists and describes the eighteen chapels and seventeen *romitori* extant in the later seventeenth century.

the chapels, smashing statues and defacing frescoes. The properties passed through the hands of a succession of owners and were finally gifted to the bishop of Casale. In 1820 a community of Observant Franciscans was installed at Crea and began slowly restoring the chapels. In 1885 a systematic restoration of the chapels began, with the support of Archbishop Nazari di Calabiana of Milan, who had earlier served as bishop of Casale, and therefore had a personal interest in the Sacro Monte at Crea.⁵⁶ Much of what the spectator sees today is the result of this often heavy-handed restoration, the sorry legacy of the vicissitudes that had befallen the sanctuary over the preceding centuries.

Oropa

The Sacro Monte at Oropa originated, like Crea, as a rural shrine conserving an image of the Virgin, supposedly sculpted by Saint Luke and brought from Palestine by Eusebius. In about 1295 the bishop of Vercelli, in whose diocese Oropa was situated, had a church built on the site of the shrine, to accommodate the pilgrims who were coming to revere the image. The first documentary reference to this image, a wooden statue of the Virgin supporting the infant Jesus on her left arm, is from 1444.⁵⁷ Modern analysis suggests that the image was sculpted at the end of the thirteenth century, probably in the Val d'Aosta.⁵⁸ Like the almost-contemporary image at Crea, it is another of the 'Black Madonnas' venerated in the alpine regions. At Oropa, as at Crea, Eusebius supposedly concealed the precious image from his Arian enemies in a crevice on the hillside. After his victory over the Arians, the hiding-place under an outcrop of rock became a shrine where the image was venerated.⁵⁹

In the twelfth century the canons of the collegiate church of Santo Stefano in the nearby city of Biella claimed jurisdiction over the shrine at Oropa, with the right to appoint two priests to serve it. Unlike Varallo or Crea, therefore, the spiritual direction of Oropa was in the hands of the secular clergy from the start. The canons' jurisdiction was recognized by the papacy in two bulls issued in 1459 and 1501.⁶⁰ But the city council of Biella and the bishop of Vercelli also

⁵⁶ Negri, *Santuario di Crea*, pp. 18–22; Visconti Cherasco, 'La nuova vita del Sacro Monte', describes the restorations from 1815 to the 1930s.

⁵⁷ *Acta Reginae Montis Oropae*, ed. by Sella and Ferraris, I, p. xxviii.

⁵⁸ Dell'Oro, 'Il Sacro Monte di Oropa', p. 81; Sorrenti, 'Quel miracolo chiamato Oropa', p. 179; Sciolla, *Il Biellese dal medioevo all'Ottocento*, pp. 173–74.

⁵⁹ *Historia della Madonna Santissima d'Oroppo*, pp. 8–10.

⁶⁰ Trompetto, *Storia del santuario di Oropa*, p. 67.



Figure 7.4. Basilica and Cloister, Sacro Monte of Oropa. Photo by the author.

claimed jurisdiction over the shrine. The dispute at Oropa between the canons, the bishop, and the city council never reached the level of acrimony that prevailed at Varallo, but it became a crucial factor in the future development of the sanctuary because it provided the opening through which the House of Savoy — in whose domains Oropa was situated — could assert control over it. In the later sixteenth century, some of Biella's patrician families started to build residences close to the church; these also provided lodging for the pilgrims who frequented the shrine.

The plague that struck Biella in June 1599 set in motion a train of events that totally transformed the sanctuary at Oropa, vastly enhancing its importance. On 13 July of that year the city council of Biella voted to seek the protection of the Virgin and St Roch against the epidemic, and donated 100 *ducatoni* to rebuild the old church at the sanctuary, which would be dedicated to these two patrons. On 16 August — the feast-day of St Roch and the day after the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin — the citizens went in procession to Oropa to venerate the image.⁶¹ Next year, work started on rebuilding the church, which was now dedicated to the Virgin alone, St Roch having been quietly dropped as a patron. The cost of rebuilding was covered by the funds voted by the council of Biella, and by offerings from the pilgrims. On the orders of the bishop of Vercelli the enclosure (*sacello*) that housed the image of the Virgin was incorporated into the new church, as was the outcrop of rock under which Saint Eusebius had reputedly concealed it. By 1620 the new church, or basilica as it came to be known, was finished.

⁶¹ Trompetto, *Storia del santuario di Oropa*, pp. 123–28.

Bishop Goria of Vercelli and a noted local preacher, the Capuchin Fedele da San Germano, planned a grand ceremony to consecrate the new basilica, culminating in the coronation of the Virgin's image. Goria was an energetic reforming prelate. Soon after his elevation to the see in 1614 he promulgated new regulations for the administration of the sanctuary at Oropa, in order to reconcile the competing interests claiming jurisdiction over it.⁶² The sanctuary was to be run by a board made up of representatives of the bishop, the canons of Santo Stefano, and the city council of Biella, aided by a secretary and a treasurer. The clerical members were in the majority. The board was to dispense the revenues from the pilgrims' offerings, which were to be deposited in a single collection-box — presumably to avoid the disagreements that plagued the Sacro Monte of Varallo. These funds were to pay the salaries of the priest who officiated at the sanctuary, who would be one of the canons of Santo Stefano, and the chaplain who assisted him. Predictably, these regulations satisfied neither the canons nor the council of Biella, since they gave the bishop ultimate control over the sanctuary. Tension persisted.

The ceremonial crowning of the Virgin began on 28 August 1620.⁶³ A crowd of people, including members of no less than 118 local confraternities, gathered at the bottom of the road leading from Biella up to the sanctuary. Accompanied by musicians, they made their way up the road through the night, singing and praying. In the morning they gathered in front of the basilica, where the bishop blessed them and celebrated mass. Then he crowned the statue of the Virgin with a specially made diadem of gold and precious stones, and placed the image in the tabernacle built for it inside the basilica. This ceremony would be repeated at every centennial, in 1720, 1820, and 1920, with processions and the recoronation of the statue.⁶⁴

At this juncture Duke Charles Emanuel of Savoy began to take a close interest in Oropa as a possible site for a dynastic shrine. His earlier plan for a dynastic mausoleum at the sanctuary of Vicoforte near Mondovì had not borne fruit, so he turned his attention to Oropa.⁶⁵ At the time of the coronation of the Virgin in 1620 he declared himself protector of the sanctuary and granted it a subsidy of 450 *lire* per year, along with the lucrative privilege of pardoning four

⁶² Dell'Oro, 'Il Sacro Monte di Oropa', pp. 89–95.

⁶³ Described in the *Breve relatione dell'Antichissima*, pp. 103–48. This work is dedicated to Duke Charles Emanuel I. Cf. Trompetto, *Storia del santuario di Oropa*, pp. 161–69.

⁶⁴ Longo, 'Sacri Monti e devozione', pp. 96–99.

⁶⁵ Cozzo, *La geografia celeste dei duchi di Savoia*, pp. 142–44.

bandits every year. He ordered one of his architects, Marcantonio Toscanella, to add a dome and choir to the basilica. One of his sons, Cardinal Maurizio, donated funds to build a cloister around the basilica and construct a formal entrance to the area, the Porta Regia. These interventions by the duke and his family initiated a systematic programme by the House of Savoy to establish themselves as the patrons of Oropa and to develop the sanctuary architecturally.⁶⁶ In 1622 Charles Emanuel's intentions became clearer when he gave orders for his chief official in Biella, the *rettore*, to take a seat on the sanctuary's board. Bishop Gorio saw this as an affront, and in 1626 he issued a decree reasserting his sole authority over the sanctuary. The canons of Santo Stefano objected, and the dispute dragged on until the third member of the governing triad, the city council of Biella, persuaded the contending parties to agree to a new set of rules, the *Temperamento* of 1631.⁶⁷ This reshuffled the governing board but satisfied no one, and the dispute continued, opening the way for the takeover of the sanctuary by the House of Savoy.

Following her victory in the civil war of 1639–42 over the princes, Charles Emanuel's sons, the regent Maria Cristina, ruling on behalf of her underage son, the future Duke Charles Emanuel II, set out to restore concord in her domains. To settle the disputes at Oropa, in September 1644 she decreed a new regulation for the sanctuary, the *Stabilimento*.⁶⁸ It expanded the governing board to eight members: four clerics representing the canons and the bishop, and the *rettore* of Biella and three representatives of the city council. The canons were to appoint a rector for the sanctuary to supervise the chaplains who ministered to the pilgrims; temporal matters would be managed by the governing board. Stripped of his authority over the sanctuary, Bishop Gorio refused to accept the new regulation and appealed to Rome. His appeal failed, leaving the House of Savoy in control at Oropa. In response to ensuing episodes of friction between the governing parties, later Savoyard sovereigns would modify the *Stabilimento*, in 1711, 1737, and 1748, while leaving its essentials intact. Oropa's system of governance would become the model for the reform of the Sacro Monte di Varallo in 1765.

The importance that the Savoyard rulers attached to the sanctuary at Oropa can be gauged from the decision to include an illustration of it in the *Theatrum*

⁶⁶ Trompetto, *Storia del santuario di Oropa*, pp. 150–56, 230–58; Sorrenti, 'Quel miracolo chiamato Oropa', pp. 181–83; Sciolla, *Il Biellese dal medioevo all'Ottocento*, pp. 175–78.

⁶⁷ Dell'Oro, 'Il Sacro Monte di Oropa', pp. 95–101.

⁶⁸ Dell'Oro, 'Il Sacro Monte di Oropa', pp. 101–15.

Sabaudiae, the sumptuous album of plates they published in 1686 to advertise the magnificence of their domains.⁶⁹ The illustration depicts the cloister surrounding the basilica (somewhat idealized, for at that time it was still largely unfinished), and the chapels of the new Sacro Monte west of the shrine, lining a pathway up the hill. It represented the life of the Virgin Mary and was planned by Fra Fedele da San Germano, the moving spirit behind the coronation ceremony in 1620, as a complement to the Marian cult celebrated at the sanctuary. His original plan for a single chapel depicting the coronation of the Virgin soon grew into a complex of chapels modelled on Varallo.⁷⁰ The plate in the *Theatrum* lists twenty-eight chapels, but not all of them were actually built. Today only twelve chapels line the pathway up the hill, and the narrative of the life of the Virgin remains incomplete. It unfolds from the Immaculate Conception as far as the Marriage at Cana, then skips to the last two chapels, portraying the Assumption and the Coronation.

The individual chapels, their terracotta figures, and painted backgrounds were financed by various communities around Biella; the local clergy and nobility did not figure among the patrons. Work began at the time of the coronation of the image of the Virgin. Emphasizing the new Sacro Monte's connection to Varallo, in 1621 the board of administrators commissioned Giovanni d'Enrico and his brother Melchiorre to create the statues for the chapels of the Immaculate Conception and the Marriage of the Virgin.⁷¹ But after this initial spurt of activity the work progressed slowly, hampered by the inability of some communities to pay for their chapels. Work only picked up again as the second coronation approached in 1720. The statues in the chapels of the Presentation and the Vigil of the Virgin in the Temple (nos 3 and 4), the Annunciation, the Visitation, and the Nativity (nos 6–8), were the work of sculptors from Biella: Pietro Giuseppe Auregio, and the brothers Bartolomeo and Carlo Francesco Termine, active between about 1686 and 1711. Some of the frescoes were painted by Giovanni Galliari, from nearby Andorno. By the time of the second coronation the sequence of chapels was ready, forming an avenue leading to the Coronation of the Virgin (or Paradiso), which crowns the hill, as at Crea.

⁶⁹ *Theatrum Sabaudiae*, ed. by Firpo, II, pl. 55, depicts Oropa.

⁷⁰ Trompetto, *Storia del santuario di Oropa*, pp. 259–74; Sorrenti, 'Quel miracolo chiamato Oropa', pp. 184–87. The *Historia della Madonna Santissima d'Oroppo* gives a list of twenty-three chapels. The first seventeen depict events in the life of the Virgin, following the sequence of the Rosary, with a couple of additions. The others are dedicated to various saints.

⁷¹ Trompetto, *Storia del santuario di Oropa*, pp. 261–74, gives details of the construction of the chapels.



Figure 7.5. View of the Sacro Monte of Oropa, c. 1675. *Theatrum Sabaudiae*, ed. by Luigi Firpo. 2 vols (Turin: Archivio storico della città di Torino, 1984), II, pl. 55.

The chapels of the Saco Monte at Oropa are dwarfed by the Marian sanctuary beside them. Through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, successive sovereigns of the House of Savoy enlarged and embellished it as a monument to the piety and power of their dynasty, making it into a grandiose complex radiating from the basilica that housed the image of the Virgin. This process began with the extension of the cloister attached to the basilica by the ducal architect Pietro Arduzzi (d. 1658/60). Work on Cardinal Maurizio's Porta Regia was halted on his death in 1657, and it was completed in 1725 by Victor Amadeus II's architect Filippo Juvarra (1676–1736). He also designed the temporary pavilion for the centennial of the coronation of the image of the Virgin in 1720. From 1747 a double courtyard lined by multi-storied blocks to house pilgrims was built south of the original cloister by the architect Pietro Giuseppe Beltrami, linked to the Porta Regia by a broad stairway. The two courtyards



Figure 7.6. Porta Regia, Sacro Monte of Oropa. Photo by the author.

were largely complete by 1795, when work stopped in the political and economic crisis brought about by the French revolutionary war.⁷²

Oropa weathered the revolutionary and Napoleonic era relatively unscathed. Its properties were seized, first by King Victor Amadeus III in 1792, and then by the revolutionary regime, but it benefitted from the protection of the city of Biella and sympathetic local functionaries, and it was not looted and desecrated like Crea. In 1802 it was recognized as a charitable foundation administered by its own board like Varallo, which allowed it to retain control of the lands it still possessed and avoid the fate that befell some of the other sanctuaries. When the monarchy was restored in 1814, the sanctuary, though shorn of some of its lands and endowments, was largely intact. In 1820 the king and queen came to Oropa for the bicentennial of the coronation of the image of the Virgin, which was attended by vast crowds, estimated — perhaps optimistically — to have been 300,000 strong.

In 1866 the new government of Italy, locked in conflict with the pope, decreed the suppression of religious foundations and sequestered Oropa's properties. But the sanctuary once again benefitted from its ties to the city of Biella.

⁷² Details in Trompetto, *Storia del santuario di Oropa*, pp. 238–58, 317–31, 438–48.

In March 1868 the city council set up a board to administer the sanctuary, composed of representatives appointed by itself and the bishop, but excluding the canons of the cathedral chapter. They protested, so after lengthy negotiations the council reconstituted the board to include two members chosen by the canons. This arrangement was approved by both the government and the pope, and the board took over the management of the sanctuary in November 1878. It was reorganized yet again by Bishop Domenico Cumino of Biella, in 1886, and after protracted litigation, the government approved the reorganization in 1902.⁷³

Meanwhile, plans were being debated for a basilica to crown the north side of the sanctuary and dominate the complex of buildings and courtyards below. It was the end-product of a series of projects put forward since the mid-eighteenth century, culminating in a design for a domed basilica by Ignazio Amedeo Galletti (1726–92). Because of the upheavals of the revolutionary period, it was not built, but a century later Galletti's design was revived in a modified form for the vast basilica, or Chiesa Nuova, that now looks down over the sanctuary. Its foundation stone was laid in 1885, and it was consecrated in 1960.⁷⁴ Today, Oropa is perhaps the most popular destination of all the Sacri Monti for pilgrims and tourists. On weekends in summer its courtyards are crowded with people attending mass in the old basilica which still houses the image of the Virgin, and families picnic and take their ease among the chapels of the Sacro Monte, as they did in Samuel Butler's time.

Ghiffa

The Sacro Monte at Ghiffa is an anomaly among the Sacri Monti. It is situated in an isolated position in the woodlands high on the western side of Lake Maggiore, with a panorama over the lake to the mountains on the opposite shore. It is small, comprising only a church, a Via Crucis, and three chapels. It was founded not by a religious order or a charismatic preacher, but by laypersons from nearby villages as an expression of their communal identity.⁷⁵

Documentation for the history of the sanctuary at Ghiffa is sparse. Recent excavations reveal that its central feature, the church, is much older than was

⁷³ Trompetto, *Storia del santuario di Oropa*, pp. 386–95.

⁷⁴ On the various projects and the construction of the Chiesa Nuova, see Trompetto, *Storia del santuario di Oropa*, pp. 422–36.

⁷⁵ Torre, *Luoghi*, pp. 62–71, discusses the origin of the sanctuary and its relationship to the local communities.



Figure 7.7. Church of the Trinity, Sacro Monte of Ghiffa. Photo by the author.

formerly believed. It in fact originated in the twelfth or thirteenth century as a small oratory for local pilgrims. At some point a church dedicated to the Trinity was built over the oratory.⁷⁶ When Bishop Ponzone of Novara conducted his visitation in 1591 he noted that the church was under the care of lay officials — *fabbricieri* — appointed by the nearby village of Ronco. Between 1605 and 1617 the building was extended to accommodate the increasing numbers of pilgrims visiting the sanctuary. The object of their veneration was an enigmatic image credited with miraculous curative powers, painted on the wall above the altar, below a fresco of the Crucifixion. It depicts three identical figures seated at a table, holding chalices that contain not the consecrated Host, but globes. They represent the Trinity: the painting is a variant of the Trinitarian iconography found at several places in the region, and may indicate a connection between the sanctuary at Ghiffa and the Trinitarian order. It is probably a seventeenth-century reworking of an earlier image.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ The excavation and restoration took place in 1993, on the initiative of the local community; Mondolfo, 'Origini e storia del "dilettissimo monte"', pp. 12–15; Agosti Bersi, 'Il Sacro Monte di Ghiffa', p. 217.

⁷⁷ Bertramini, 'Iconografia della SS. Trinità nel Verbano-Cusio-Ossola', pp. 66–73. The

The sanctuary at Ghiffa was supported by offerings from the pilgrims. The local feudatories, the Morigia family, took no interest in it, and the local population — fishermen living beside the lake and farmers tending the vineyards and terraces above — could contribute little.⁷⁸ When Bishop Bascapè visited the shrine in 1595 he learned that the local clergy had no plans to enlarge it.⁷⁹ But in 1647, a well-to-do local family, the Canetta, commissioned the first of the three chapels that became Ghiffa's diminutive Sacro Monte. Dedicated to the Coronation of the Virgin, the first chapel is an octagonal structure with a porch, resembling chapels at both Orta and Varallo, housing a statue of the Virgin being crowned by the three persons of the Trinity. A bell tower was added to the church, and in 1659 a second chapel was constructed, representing the baptism of Christ. Inside, the figures of Christ and John the Baptist are surmounted by images of God the Father and the Holy Spirit, completing the representation of the Trinity; under the floor a cistern stands in for the River Jordan. In 1701 the third and last chapel was built, representing Abraham and three white-robed angels, another image associated with the Trinity: Abraham saw three persons and worshipped one ('tres vidit et unum adoravit').⁸⁰ The artists responsible for these images have not been identified, but in all likelihood they were local craftsmen. In 1728 a pilgrim hospice was constructed, suggesting that by now the sanctuary was attracting a considerable number of worshippers. Finally, in the middle of the eighteenth century, near to the hospice, a Via Crucis was built in the form of a colonnade with fourteen bays for the stations of the Cross, depicted in a series of paintings on the inner wall. Ghiffa is the only Sacro Monte, apart from Belmonte and Domodossola, to possess a Via Crucis.⁸¹

In the nineteenth century the sanctuary at Ghiffa fell on hard times, and in 1869 its possessions were expropriated by the Italian state. Control of the site

Trinitarians were founded in 1198 to ransom enslaved Christians from their Muslim captors. Torre, *Luoghi*, p. 63, discusses the variants of this iconography, which also takes the form of a three-faced image, the *vultus trifrons*, five examples of which occur in the area.

⁷⁸ Mondolfo, 'Ghiffa: uomini e storie attorno al Monte della Trinità', pp. 141–44. The Morigia were granted the fief in 1447. After they died out in 1783, it passed to the Borromeo family.

⁷⁹ Marzi, 'Ghiffa', p. 92.

⁸⁰ Agosti Bersi, 'Il Sacro Monte di Ghiffa', p. 218; Mondolfo, 'Origini e storia', pp. 28–33.

⁸¹ The Via Crucis, an early Christian devotional practice, became popular during the Counter-Reformation, and was promoted by the Franciscans: Teetaert de Zedelgem, 'Aperçu historique sur la dévotion au Chemin de la Croix'; Signorotti, 'Gli esordi della *via crucis* nel Milanese', p. 145, dates its adoption in northern Italy to the early seventeenth century.

passed to the nearby villages of Ronco and Ghiffa, which were merged, with the sanctuary as their symbolic centre.⁸² The sanctuary and the woodlands around it were neglected: roofs leaked, buildings deteriorated, and restoration became imperative.⁸³ In 1985 a newly elected communal council launched a campaign to restore the sanctuary and the forest around it. At their urging the zone was declared a Special Nature Reserve in 1987, and the long-overdue work of restoration on the church and chapels began. Crowning this local initiative, in 2003 the restored sanctuary took its place as one of the Sacri Monti designated by UNESCO.

Varese

The Sacro Monte at Varese supposedly originated, like those at Crea and Oropa, as a hilltop shrine sacred to the Virgin Mary, complete with a miraculous image attributed to Saint Luke. It was also the supposed site of a victory over the Arian heretics won — in this case — by St Ambrose at the end of the fourth century. By about 1000 a church dedicated to the Virgin stood on the hill. It was rebuilt in the later fifteenth century at the orders of Duke Galeazzo Maria of Milan (r. 1466–76). By that time a little group of female anchorites was living there under the leadership of the Beata Caterina da Pallanza and the Beata Giuliana da Busto Arsizio. In 1474, with the permission of Pope Sixtus IV, they formed themselves into a community of Augustinian sisters and built a convent next to the church.⁸⁴ The site, known as Santa Maria del Monte, was frequented by local pilgrims, who climbed a steep track up the hillside to reach the church and worship the image of the Virgin. A century later, this path would be rebuilt as a processional way lined with fourteen chapels representing the sequence of the Rosary, to form a Sacro Monte.

The idea for a sequence of chapels ultimately derived from Varallo, but at Varese as at Crea, they followed the popular devotional sequence of the Rosary. Three triumphal arches marked the starting-points of the three sequences that constitute the Rosary — the Joyful, Dolorous, and Glorious Mysteries. The processional way, over two kilometres in length, was designed to allow enough

⁸² Torre, *Luoghi*, pp. 64–65.

⁸³ Bertolo, 'Il Novecento', pp. 51–58; Marzi, 'Vent'anni di restauri', pp. 82–106.

⁸⁴ Corsini, *Affreschi del Sacro Monte di Varese*, p. 13; Crippa, 'Il Sacro Monte sopra Varese', p. 246; Colombo, *Sculture dei Sacri Monti sopra Varese*, pp. 20–21, 91–92. On the founders, see *Mirabile Ydio ne li sancti soy*, ed. by Biffi.



Figure 7.8.
Processional Way, Sacro Monte
of Varese. Photo by the author.

time between the chapels for pilgrims walking at a normal pace to recite the prescribed ‘decade’ of prayers for each mystery before they reached the next chapel. The porches of the chapels and the triumphal arches, which were provided with fountains, offered spaces for rest and reflection. The sequence culminated in the final Glorious Mystery, the Coronation of the Virgin, which was located in the church of Santa Maria del Monte at the summit, where the image of the Virgin was kept. The pilgrims’ path thus functioned as a catechistical device, a ‘dramatized dogma’, marking out in architectural form the prayers and meditations prescribed by the Rosary.⁸⁵ The sanctuary consequently came to be known as the *Fabbrica del Rosario*.

⁸⁵ Wharton, *Selling Jerusalem*, p. 135.

The cult of the Rosary had been gaining in popularity since Pope Pius V proclaimed it as a feast-day to mark the supposed intervention by the Virgin that secured the Christian victory over the Ottomans at Lepanto in 1571. Confraternities dedicated to the Rosary proliferated, and manuals were published, expounding it for the faithful. Since the Rosary was often practised as a collective devotion, the Sacro Monte at Varese was designed with sufficient space to permit groups of pilgrims to perform the sequence of prayers together.⁸⁶ Starting at the foot of the hill, at the church of the Immaculate Conception, the first of the Joyful Mysteries, they wended their way upwards, praying and meditating on each mystery, until they reached the climactic moment in the sequence at the top of the hill, the Coronation of Virgin in the church of Santa Maria del Monte.

The intellectual author of the Sacro Monte at Varese was a noted preacher, the Capuchin Giovanni Battista Aguggiari of Monza, who was appointed guardian of the Capuchin house at Varese in 1604. But the original inspiration seems to have come from the superior of the Augustinian convent, Maria Tecla Cid, a Spanish noblewoman with relatives in the government of Lombardy. She had proposed building a chapel halfway up the hill, where pilgrims could pause for rest and meditation during their arduous ascent. In 1604 her confessor apparently mentioned her proposal to Aguggiari, who developed it into a sequence of chapels and began a preaching campaign to raise the money to build it. As with many Counter-Reformation clerics, his aim was not merely to build a sanctuary but also to impose discipline and decorum on the pilgrims. In his eyes it was 'not fitting that they should walk in a disorderly manner, without devotion, and without any spiritual direction, up to the church'.⁸⁷ The arrangement of the chapels at regular intervals along the pilgrims' way imposed this discipline.

The Sacro Monte at Varese thus owed its origin to two different sources: the inspiration of the community of religious women on the hilltop and the zeal of the local Capuchins. This gave rise to a kind of creative tension: while Aguggiari planned the chapels and the processional way, the community of women on the summit kept control of their church and directed its artistic development.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Zanzi, 'Per la storia di una "Fabbrica del Rosario"', pp. 193–97.

⁸⁷ Crippa, 'Il Sacro Monte sopra Varese', p. 247: 'era cosa sconvenevole, che camminassero senza ordine, senza divotione, e senza alcuno trattamento spirituale, sino alla Chiesa'. Zanzi, 'Per la storia di una "Fabbrica del Rosario"', pp. 164, 189, also stresses this point.

⁸⁸ Longo, *Memorie di Gerusalemme*, p. 76.

As the architect for the processional way and the chapels, Aguggiari chose Giuseppe Bernascone, 'il Mancino' (c. 1560–1630). Born near Varese, from 1578 he worked on the church of San Vittore in Varese under Pellegrino Tibaldi, and took over as director after the latter's departure in 1585. He was involved in other projects in the city at this time, including the church of Sant'Antonio. He first appears in the documentary record as a 'capomastro' or master builder; later on he would be described by the loftier title 'architect'. In 1598 the Sisters of Santa Maria del Monte commissioned him to build a new bell tower for their church, so it was logical for Aguggiari to choose him to design the new Sacro Monte a few years later.⁸⁹

Bernascone was a very talented architect with a deep feeling for landscape and siting, and great formal inventiveness. He laid out the Sacro Monte as a sequence of straight stretches between the chapels, giving views of the surrounding mountains and the plain below. He began in 1604 by designing the church of the Immaculate Conception, the starting-point for the route up the hill. All the chapels and triumphal arches along the processional way were built to his designs, in rapid succession: at least seven of the chapels and the first triumphal arch were under construction by 1607. All but one are variants of a centralized plan: circular, octagonal, rectangular, or elliptical. The exception is the chapel of the Annunciation (no. 2), which Bernascone designed as a copy of the Santa Casa of Loreto, for reasons of verisimilitude, as at Varallo. The underlying unity in the design of the chapels and triumphal arches, the elegance of their proportions and detailing, and the sweeping perspectives along the processional way combine to make Varese architecturally the most distinguished of all the Sacri Monti. Samuel Butler compared Bernascone's chapels to a set of variations by Handel — high praise indeed, given his admiration for the composer.⁹⁰

On 25 March 1605 — the feast of the Annunciation — the Sacro Monte was inaugurated in a ceremony led by the confessor of the Augustinian convent. In the presence of a crowd of onlookers and notables he laid the foundation stones for the first three chapels.⁹¹ Construction proceeded fast, speeded

⁸⁹ Giampaolo 'Bernascone, Giuseppe, detto il Mancino'; Crespi, 'Paesaggio e Sacri Monti', p. 223; Colombo, 'Descrizione della Fabbrica del S. Rosario a Santa Maria del Monte', pp. 263–68.

⁹⁰ Cannon-Brookes, 'The Sacri Monti of Lombardy and Piedmont', p. 291; Butler, *Alps and Sanctuaries*, p. 228.

⁹¹ Colombo, 'I documenti inediti del notaio varesino Modesto Dralli', p. 133.

by the artistic fertility of Bernascone, the organizational skill of Aguggiari, and the labour donated by the local people. Four of the chapels were financed by patrician families from Milan. The Litta paid for the Flagellation (no. 7); the Carcano for the Ascension (no. 12); the Omodei, for the Presentation in the Temple (no. 4); Gian Angelo Annoni gave 3,000 *scudi* to complete the chapel of the Ascension (no. 13).⁹² The other chapels were financed by nearby local communities.

From the start the Sacro Monte at Varese attracted the patronage of Archbishop Federico Borromeo. He approved the original project and in June 1606 came in person to examine the work and bless a procession of pilgrims from Varese.⁹³ He subsequently drafted two regulations for the sanctuary, one for its administration, the other laying down the artistic norms for the construction and decoration of the chapels, which Pope Paul V endorsed in 1610.⁹⁴ To administer the sanctuary Borromeo established a board of four laymen and two clerics, headed by the confessor of the Augustinian convent. The board was to meet every month and render its accounts annually. There was to be a single collection-box for offerings.

Borromeo's orders for the planning and decoration of the buildings are similar to those promulgated by Bascapè for Varallo. All plans were to be approved by the board of *fabbricieri* and submitted to the archbishop for final approval. The paintings on the walls were to correspond accurately to the actions they represented. The floors of the chapels were to be raised above the level of the porches, and their exteriors were to be decorated with etched designs (*graffiatura*) and reliefs. The statues in the chapels were to be one-third larger than life-size. Each chapel was to have an attached oratory for private prayer and was to be surrounded by a balustrade to keep horses at a distance. Trees were to be planted along the processional route and around the chapels 'to make the pilgrims' journey more pleasant and devout'. For each chapel then under construction Borromeo laid down specific instructions, stipulating that for the statues the *fabbricieri* were to seek the advice of Marc'Antonio Prestinari and his brother Cristoforo (then employed at Orta), 'or some other expert modeller'. This order indicates that already by 1606 some of the chapels were built

⁹² The sequence can be followed in Colombo, *Sculture dei Sacri Monti sopra Varese*, pp. 111–32, and Corsini, *Affreschi del Sacro Monte di Varese*, pp. 20–22.

⁹³ Zanzi, 'Per la storia di una "Fabbrica del Rosario"', p. 190.

⁹⁴ Zanzi, 'Per la storia di una "Fabbrica del Rosario"', p. 186; Crespi, 'Paesaggio e Sacri Monti', pp. 231–35, gives the text of the regulations.

and were ready to receive their figures and frescoes. In fact, although the structures of all but one of the chapels seems to have been finished by 1623, decorating them took much longer; the figures for the last one, the Assumption (no. 14), were not put into place until 1713. In 1608 the first contracts for statues were awarded, and Morazzone was commissioned to paint the frescoes for the chapel of the Flagellation.⁹⁵

Morazzone was at the height of his creative powers: he had just finished the frescoes of the Ascent to Calvary at Varallo, and after completing the Flagellation at Varese he would return to Varallo to work on the Ecce Homo chapel. In the Flagellation chapel his frescoes complement the statues of Christ and his tormentors by Martino Retti with depictions of the preceding events: Christ before Caiaphas, Pilate freeing Barabbas, and Christ stripped for flagellation.⁹⁶ The subdued palette of grey-greens and earth tones that he used in these scenes contrasts with the graphic violence of Retti's figures. Hemmed in by sinewy torturers and a savage dog with bared fangs, Christ bends under the blows, leaning towards the spectators to draw them into the scene to share his suffering. In the dome above, Morazzone painted six lamenting angels, reminiscent of Gaudenzio's angels in the Crucifixion chapel at Varallo.

Morazzone and the Prestinari brothers were part of a group of artists and sculptors working at Varese who also worked at Varallo, Orta, and Crea. In 1611 Retti and Tabacchetti — just then completing the Paradiso chapel at Crea — contracted to produce a group of thirty-five figures for the Disputation in the Temple at Varese (no. 5).⁹⁷ The statues were not delivered, however, because Tabacchetti died shortly after the contract was signed. The statues now in the chapel are by Francesco Silva (1568–1641), born at Morbio in the Canton Ticino, and trained in Rome in the workshop of Guglielmo dell Porta. He became the chief sculptor at Varese, and worked there, aided by his son Agostino, until his death in 1641. After Cristoforo Prestinari died in 1621 the *fabbricieri* commissioned Silva to model the figures for the chapel of the Presentation (no. 4). He followed Federico Borromeo's injunction to depict the action realistically. The focal point of the composition is the altar: the Christ child is laid on it; the high priest, crowned with a tall mitre, stands behind it; members of the family reverently line the steps on either side. Meanwhile, in

⁹⁵ Corsini, *Affreschi del Sacro Monte di Varese*, pp. 37–42; Stoppa, *Pier Francesco Mazzucchelli detto Il Morazzone*, pp. 191–95.

⁹⁶ Retti was born in Canton Ticino and died c. 1637.

⁹⁷ Details in Colombo, 'I documenti inediti del notaio varesino'.

contrast to this awed reverence, a pickpocket extracts coins from a bystander's purse and turns, fingers on lips, to silence a dog that is watching him.⁹⁸

For the chapel of the Visitation (no. 2), Silva modelled a beautifully observed study of a blind musician: his sightless eyes turned upwards, he holds his violin — an actual instrument — on his knee, awaiting the signal to play. The interplay of gesture and facial expression among the figures in the chapel of the Disputation (no. 5) is another display of Silva's realistic bravura and skill as a storyteller. On either side of the youthful Christ the doctors in their robes leaf through their books, argue and wag their fingers, or simply gaze, dumb-founded. Each one is portrayed as a distinct individual, his character realistically delineated. One spreads his hands in perplexity while another — perhaps a self-portrait — intently follows the debate, chin on hand. And Silva was also capable of powerful theatrical effects. In the chapel of the Resurrection (no. 11) the triumphant figure of Christ, right hand pointing heavenward, bursts out of the tomb towards the ranks of saints and angels awaiting him in the half-dome above.⁹⁹

As was customary practice, the fresco decoration of the chapels followed the installation of the figures. In 1624 the Lampugnani brothers, Giovan Francesco (1588–1651) and Giovan Battista (1590–1640), frescoed the upper level of the chapel of the Immaculate Conception (no. 1), above the statues of eight doctors of the Church standing in niches along the walls. The Lampugnani brothers returned a few years later to paint the chapel of the Ascension (no. 13), and a nocturnal Adoration of the Shepherds with carolling angels, in the church of Santa Maria del Monte.¹⁰⁰ About the same time Giovan Mauro della Rovere, who had worked at Varallo, painted an Ascension in the central vault of the nave of the church of Santa Maria del Monte, in which Christ is escorted heavenward by a choir of angels.

This first phase of artistic activity at Varese concluded with the sweeping narrative panorama painted by Bartolomeo Vandoni (1603–76) in the chapel of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane (no. 6). The figures are by Francesco Silva. In Vandoni's fresco the critical moment of the action takes place against a backdrop of scenes depicting its aftermath: the recognition of Christ, the kiss of Judas, Peter cutting off the ear of the High Priest's servant. This sequence

⁹⁸ Colombo, *Sculture dei Sacri Monti sopra Varese*, pp. 49–52.

⁹⁹ Colombo, *Sculture dei Sacri Monti sopra Varese*, pp. 57–65.

¹⁰⁰ Corsini, *Affreschi del Sacro Monte di Varese*, pp. 59–68. The brothers were from Legnano and worked all over Lombardy.

is bracketed by paintings on the walls that complete the narrative: on the left Judas advances at the head of a menacing crowd, while on the right, Christ is led off into captivity.¹⁰¹

After a long interval following the plague of 1629–30, artistic activity at Varese resumed in 1648. The brothers Giovan Battista (c. 1600–65) and Giovan Paolo Recchi (c. 1606–86) from Como, pupils of Morazzone, decorated the octagonal chapel of the Crowning with Thorns (no. 8). In the foreground, Francesco Silva had placed the seated figure of Christ and three torturers, one raising a rod to strike him. The frescoes on the walls are framed as false perspective arches surmounted by cherubs in niches, amplifying the narrative: first, the prelude of Christ's appearances before Caiaphas, Herod, and Pilate prior to the Flagellation; then the conclusion as he is led away to be crucified. From the cupola, skilfully painted in false perspective, spectators gaze down from behind a balustrade.¹⁰² Giovan Paolo Recchi returned to Varese a few years later to paint the Ascent to Calvary (no. 9), which he rendered as a continuous narrative flowing around the three walls of the chapel, leading from the gate of Jerusalem to the place of execution.¹⁰³ The sky above is dark and threatening, the procession of figures modelled by Francesco Silva barely visible in the twilight. A man with a prominent goitre — reminiscent of the figures by Gaudenzio and Tabacchetti at Varallo — tugs on the rope dragging the cross, and Veronica holds out her kerchief, imprinted with Christ's face.¹⁰⁴

The Recchi brothers' illusionistic perspective in this chapel marks a shift in stylistic register towards a theatrical mode, as at Varallo. It is exemplified in the chapel of the Resurrection (no. 11), painted in 1654 by Isidoro Bianchi (1581–1662), framing the figures modelled by Francesco Silva. Bianchi, from Campione on Lake Lugano, was another pupil of Morazzone. He had previously worked in Turin for the dukes of Savoy and returned there after completing his work at Varese.¹⁰⁵ Bianchi painted a series of panels to amplify the chapel's central message. They are framed by elaborate trompe-l'œil pilasters and entablatures. The central panel, directly over the statue of the Risen Christ, depicts the apocryphal scene of his appearance to his mother, while on one side

¹⁰¹ Corsini, *Affreschi del Sacro Monte di Varese*, pp. 87–94, 252. Vandoni was from Oleggio, near Novara, and spent his career working in its immediate area.

¹⁰² Corsini, *Affreschi del Sacro Monte di Varese*, pp. 101–11, 251–52.

¹⁰³ Corsini, *Affreschi del Sacro Monte di Varese*, pp. 139–45.

¹⁰⁴ Colombo, *Sculture dei Sacri Monti sopra Varese*, pp. 54–55.

¹⁰⁵ Corsini, *Affreschi del Sacro Monte di Varese*, pp. 113–19, 246.



Figure 7.9. Chapel of the Crucifixion, Sacro Monte di Varese. Photo by the author.

he appears to Mary Magdalene, on the other to the disciples at Emmaus. Below, naked figures of redeemed souls rise from their tombs, and above, at the apex of the dome, the heavenly host welcomes Christ as he takes his place with the other two persons of the Trinity.

The chapel of the Crucifixion (no. 10) is the most spectacular and most moving of the sequence at Varese. To emphasize its importance, Bernascone made this chapel bigger than the others and sited it for maximum visibility on a sharp turn at the top of a long upward slope in the pilgrims' route.¹⁰⁶ The chapel was already built by 1623 but remained empty until the sculptor Dionigi Bussola and the painter Antonio Busca, who had collaborated so effectively at Orta, completed the interior in 1668. Bussola was evidently inspired by Gaudenzio's Crucifixion at Varallo, but whereas Gaudenzio's composition is static, representing the moment of Christ's death, Bussola's is dynamic: burly men strain to haul the cross upright, burdened by Christ's body.¹⁰⁷ The darkness in the chapel

¹⁰⁶ Bigiogero, *Le glorie della Gran Vergine*, p. 61.

¹⁰⁷ Colombo, *Sculture dei Sacri Monti sopra Varese*, pp. 76–80; Lotti, *La decima cappella del Sacro Monte di Varese*, pp. 65–67.

creates a sense of awe and foreboding, which Bussola accentuates by elevating the scene on a hillock above the floor, as in Gaudenzio's chapel, to direct the pilgrims' gaze up at Christ as he is raised on the cross. The figures Bussola modelled for this very large scene — about fifty in all — are shrouded in the gloom of the eclipse at the moment of the Crucifixion. Meanwhile, the two thieves are being bound to their crosses; a Roman soldier on horseback observes; Mary and the holy women stand by horror-struck; spectators of all kinds, some with children and dogs, look on. Behind Bussola's figures Busca painted a vast crowd of onlookers on the surrounding slopes, and on the ceiling he painted lamenting angels, recalling Gaudenzio's angels at Varallo.¹⁰⁸

In 1699, to celebrate the centenary of the foundation of the Sacro Monte, its director Domenico Bigiogero published a guide to the sanctuary, accompanied by biographies of its founders and the two abbesses who succeeded them, Benedetta Bimia and Illuminata Alciati. He repeated the legends that the shrine was founded by St Ambrose, and that the statue of the Virgin there was the work of Saint Luke.¹⁰⁹ His work then recounted the history of the Sacro Monte since its foundation and gave detailed descriptions of the chapels, the patrons and the communities that commissioned them, and the artists who worked in them.

By the time Bigiogero published his book, the Sacro Monte at Varese was almost complete. In 1713 the Milanese painter Stefano Maria Legnani, 'il Legnanino' (1660/61–1715), came to Varese to work on the only chapel that was still unfinished, the Assumption of the Virgin (no. 14).¹¹⁰ He had already worked at Varese in 1681, assisting his father in decorating the Martignoni chapel in the sanctuary church, and five years later in the chapel of the Ascent to Calvary (no. 9). He died soon after he returned to Varese, so the frescoes in the chapel were completed, to his design, by Pietro Gilardi (1679–1733).¹¹¹ Clad in a long white robe, with shafts of golden light radiating from her head, Mary is borne up by a flight of cherubs to where her son awaits her, arms spread wide, surrounded by saints and angels on billowing clouds. The Assumption

¹⁰⁸ Corsini, *Affreschi del Sacro Monte di Varese*, pp. 167–75.

¹⁰⁹ Bigiogero, *Le glorie della Gran Vergine*, pp. 4–18.

¹¹⁰ He trained first in Bologna and then in Rome, under Carlo Maratta, after which he worked in Genoa, Novara, and Turin, where he decorated the apartments of the Palazzo Carignano.

¹¹¹ Corsini, *Affreschi del Sacro Monte di Varese*, pp. 198–208, 248–250; Gilardi was also from Milan and carried out numerous commissions in the region. He became the head of the Accademia di San Luca at Milan in 1719.

chapel completed the sequence that Aguggiari and Bernascone had planned a century before. To a contemporary observer, the speed with which the complex of chapels had taken shape seemed miraculous, an unmistakable sign of divine favour.¹¹²

Sacro Monte Calvario, Domodossola

Domodossola is a small town in the upper reaches of the Val d'Ossola, the valley leading from Lombardy over the Simplon Pass to the Swiss Cantons. At the time that the Sacro Monte Calvario was founded there, in the middle of the seventeenth century, its population would have numbered about eight hundred souls. The origin of the Monte Calvario can be traced to the initiative of two local Capuchins, who evidently sought to emulate the Sacri Monti being built not far away at Varese and Orta, and ultimately Varallo itself. In 1656 the two Capuchins, Gioacchino da Cassano and Andrea da Rho, erected a cross on the steep hill just outside the town, the Mattarella, inaugurating the new Sacro Monte, which they planned in the form of a Via Crucis. On 6 August, the Feast of the Transfiguration, they marked the positions for the chapels that were to represent the Via Crucis with wooden crosses.¹¹³

For their project they enlisted the financial support of Giovanni Matteo Capis, the head of the town's richest family. His crucial role as patron is a direct parallel to that of Milano Scarognini at Varallo and Amico Canobio at Orta. A prosperous merchant and a lawyer by training, he had served as the mayor of Domodossola and the director of its hospital, as an official of the Inquisition, and as the patron of local religious brotherhoods. He had led the opposition to an attempt by the Spanish crown to turn the town into a fief and sell it off. The opposition succeeded, and in 1657 the crown abandoned its efforts. The foundation of the Sacro Monte Calvario can perhaps be seen as an assertion of civic pride crowning Domodossola's victory in its struggle with the Spanish crown.¹¹⁴

Capis already had ties to the Reformed Observants of Varallo, and his brother was a Regular Franciscan, so it was natural for him to join with the two Capuchins in establishing the new sanctuary. They designed their Via Crucis to

¹¹² Zanzi, 'Per la storia di una 'Fabbrica del Rosario'', p. 154.

¹¹³ 'Memoria', in Bertramini, 'Alcuni importanti documenti sull'origine del Sacro Monte Calvario di Domodossola', pp. 215–216.

¹¹⁴ Longo, *Memorie di Gerusalemme*, pp. 137–144.

imitate the stations of the Cross in Jerusalem, but they did not adhere strictly to the canonical form. Their project followed the normal pattern of fourteen stations terminating in the entombment of Christ, but added a fifteenth chapel depicting the Resurrection, presumably to leave the departing pilgrims with a message of hope and redemption. Domodossola is the earliest of the Sacri Monti based on the Via Crucis. Those at Ghiffa and Belmonte are later in date, and are less elaborate than the sequence of chapels at Domodossola.

On 7 May 1657 Bishop Giulio Maria Odescalchi of Novara — the future Pope Innocent XI — conducted a pastoral visit of the proposed sanctuary.¹¹⁵ Like Bascapè at Varallo and Federico Borromeo at Varese, he asserted direct control over every aspect of the work. He appointed Capis as director of construction and drew up instructions for the building and decoration of the chapels. The figures and paintings should be decorous: they should clearly convey the meaning of the mysteries and stimulate the devotion of the worshippers. Trees were to be planted everywhere, to beautify the place and provide shade for prayer and meditation. Since the sanctuary represented the holiest sites in Jerusalem, the Via Crucis and Calvary, Bishop Odescalchi ordered that the canons of the cathedral were to conduct well-regulated processions of pilgrims to encourage

the devotion and veneration that are to be sought in a holy place of such merit and benefit for their souls, all the more so if they avail themselves of this particular means to eschew and banish gambling and debauchery from their feast-days, which offends God and brings perdition to their souls, if they unheedingly give themselves over to these vices.¹¹⁶

Like Brother Aguggiari at Varese and so many other Counter-Reformation clerics, Bishop Odescalchi was determined to discipline his flock and purge their devotions of misconduct and excess. His injunction suggests that in his view pilgrimages were to serve as an alternative on feast days, to the worldly pleasures that appeared unseemly to a rigorous Counter-Reformation prelate.

¹¹⁵ 'Verbale di visita pastorale in data del 7 maggio 1658', and 'Ordini per il Sacro Monte fatti da mons. Giulio Maria Odescalchi, 7 maggio 1658', in Bertramini, 'Alcuni importanti documenti', pp. 212–215.

¹¹⁶ Bertramini, 'Alcuni importanti documenti', p. 214: 'quella divotione, e veneratione che si ricerca ad un santo loco di tanto merito, e profitto delle anime, e tanto maggiore quanto che si valeranno di questo mezzo per divertire e distogliere particolarmente le feste dalli giochi et crappola quelli con offesa di Dio, e perdizione delle loro anime senza alcun riguardo si danno a questi vitij'.

The sanctuary's church was the first building to be constructed.¹¹⁷ By 1672 the walls were complete and work started on the cupola; the portico was finished in 1686, a choir to extend the nave in 1732.¹¹⁸ Construction was facilitated by the availability of stone from the ruins of the castle on the top of the hill, and by the labour donated by the local population, spurred on by the grant of indulgences for work on this meritorious project. The first mass was celebrated in the church in 1662, below a statue of Christ Dying on the Cross by Bussola and his pupil Giovanni Battista Maestri, 'il Volpino' (c. 1640–80).¹¹⁹ The scene is depicted with stark simplicity. On either side, outside the frame, the Virgin and Saint John gaze up as Christ breathes his last, his head tilted backwards, while the grief-stricken Mary Magdalene embraces the foot of the cross, pointing upwards in a Leonardesque gesture.

Work on the chapels proceeded steadily, thanks to the friendly relationship that grew up between Capis and Bussola. He would come to the Sacro Monte Calvario with his son and his assistants in the summer (work was impossible during the harsh winters). Bussola and his team were highly productive: while they were working at Domodossola, they were also modelling large numbers of figures for the sanctuaries at Varese and Orta. In 1664 they built a furnace at the Sacro Monte Calvario for firing the figures they were modelling there, but it does not seem to have seen much use subsequently. Most of the figures were probably modelled and fired in Bussola's workshop in Milan and then transported in pieces to the Sacro Monte Calvario, where they were assembled and installed in the chapels. Capis records that one consignment of figures, including two horses, was brought in from Varallo.

Next to the Crucifixion Bussola modelled the Deposition (no. 13): the sagging body of Christ is lowered into the arms of Saint John, while the Virgin and Mary Magdalene stand to one side in despair. In the Sepulchre below the church he modelled the figure of the Dead Christ (no. 14). These beautifully executed, deeply moving figures are among the highest achievements of his prolific career. In the next few years he would go on to produce other groups of statues for the Sacro Monte Calvario: Christ Meeting his Mother on the

¹¹⁷ For a study of the chapels see *Sacro Monte Calvario: Domodossola* <<http://www.sacro-montecalvario.it/objects/pagina.asp?>> [accessed 7 October 2018].

¹¹⁸ The progress of the construction can be followed in the 'Memoria' in Bertamini, 'Alcuni importanti documenti', pp. 215–18.

¹¹⁹ Mander, 'Maestri, Giovan Battista, detto Il Volpino'; he worked for much of his career under Bussola at the Duomo of Milan. On Bussola's work at Domodossola, see Fattalini and Marzi, 'Domodossola'.

Way to Calvary (no. 4) and Christ Carrying the Cross (no. 2). His final work at Domodossola was the pair of statues representing the angel and the Virgin Annunciate in a replica of the Santa Casa of Loreto, built next to the church in 1674, based on the 'exact measurements' of the original, as Capis noted.¹²⁰

An important benefactor of the Sacro Monte Calvario was Baron Kaspar Jodok von Stockalper (1609–91), a magnate from the city of Brig in the Canton of Valais across the Simplon Pass. He was the head of a rich family of merchants and landowners: he had fought for the Habsburgs, had served as governor of the canton, and had improved the mule-track over the Simplon, making it passable for wheeled traffic. His family was linked commercially to the Capis, and also to the Fassola in the Val Sesia. In 1679 he was accused of treason and forced to flee to Domodossola, where he lived in comfortable exile for five years until the political situation in the Valais changed and he was able to return to Brig. In gratitude for his generosity to the town of Domodossola during his exile, a statue of him by Giuseppe Rusnati was placed in a chapel dedicated to the Nativity, representing his namesake Gaspar, one of the Magi, accompanied by a Moorish page. These statues were later reused in the chapel of the Resurrection.¹²¹

Capis died in 1681, bequeathing his fortune to the Sacro Monte. Over the next decade three other stations and the oratory of the Madonna delle Grazie, housing an image of the Virgin, were built.¹²² The architect was Tommaso Lazzaro from the Val d'Intelvi, north of Como. He also designed the replica of the Santa Casa of Loreto, founded a few years later. His designs are unoriginal derivatives of chapels in the other Sacri Monti. The Capuchin monastery on the hill was completed in 1667.

Construction then slowed down. The chapel of the Resurrection (no. 15) was built in 1690, and the chapel of Christ Stripped of his Garments (no. 10), a decade later. The statues for these chapels — in the latter chapel totalling twenty-nine figures and three horses — were modelled by Giuseppe Rusnati. His Resurrection chapel resonates with the drama of this climactic moment: Christ rises to heaven on a plume of cloud, whose volcanic power has blown the lid off the tomb and left the guards stunned and helpless.

¹²⁰ 'con le giuste misure'; Bertramini, 'Alcuni importanti documenti', p. 216.

¹²¹ Longo, *Memorie di Gerusalemme*, p. 144; Fattalini and Marzi, 'Domodossola', p. 86; Rastelli, 'Giovanni Battista Feliciano Fassola conte di S. Maiolo', p. 444.

¹²² Dates of construction are: Christ Meets his Mother (no. 4), 1661; Christ Falls for the Third Time (no. 9), 1664; Christ Carrying the Cross (no. 2), 1666.

Work resumed in the middle of the eighteenth century, sporadically and at a lower level of creativity. Christ Condemned by Pilate (no. 1) was completed in the 1740s.¹²³ The Crucifixion (no. 11) was built in 1768, to a design by Pier Maria Perini, with a crowd of twenty-three figures and two horses modelled by Giovanni Luca Raineri of Rossa in the Val Sesia.¹²⁴ Three more chapels were built in the years after 1770, again designed by Perini: Veronica Wiping Christ's Face (no. 6), Christ Falling the Second Time (no. 7), and Christ and the Women of Jerusalem (no. 8).¹²⁵ Work then stopped and the sequence of stations remained incomplete through the revolutionary period and into the Restoration. Christ and Simon of Cyrene (no. 5) was constructed and decorated in 1848 at the expense of the Catholic philanthropist Count Giacomo Mellerio, but Christ Falls for the First Time (no. 3) was only built in 1907. Several of the chapels were restored in the nineteenth century; some did not receive their figures until the mid-twentieth century.¹²⁶

The same fate that befell most of the other Sacri Monti overtook the Sacro Monte Calvario during the Napoleonic period: in 1810 the Capuchin monastery was secularized and its properties were sequestered. But in the political and religious climate of the Restoration, the Monte Calvario underwent a revival. At Easter 1828 the philosopher-priest Antonio Rosmini (1797–1855) withdrew to a cell in the monastery for solitary prayer and meditation, with the assistance of Count Giacomo Mellerio, who became his friend and patron. They had met two years earlier at the house of the author Alessandro Manzoni in Milan. At Domodossola Rosmini conceived the idea for his Institute of Charity, later known as the Rosminian Brothers, and drafted the regulations for it. His initiative was welcomed by Bishop Morozzo della Rocca of Novara, who granted the Monte Calvario to him.¹²⁷ Papal approval of the Institute followed in 1837. In 1857 the Rosminians established their novitiate at the Monte Calvario and began to restore the buildings. They continue to occupy them down to the present day.

¹²³ It was destroyed in 1822 and rebuilt in its present form in 1900–09.

¹²⁴ Identification is uncertain; he is perhaps the Luca Raineri listed as 'architetto e capomastro' in Debiaggi, *Dizionario degli artisti valesiani*, p. 143.

¹²⁵ On the architects Antonio and Domenico Perini, active in the earlier eighteenth century, and Pier Maria Perini — presumably from the next generation of the family — see Fattalini, 'Il Sacro Monte Calvario di Domodossola', p. 203.

¹²⁶ Fattalini and Marzi, 'Domodossola', pp. 77–81.

¹²⁷ Fattalini, 'Il Sacro Monte Calvario di Domodossola', pp. 204–05; Fattalini and Marzi, 'Domodossola', p. 73.

Ossuccio

The Sacro Monte Madonna del Soccorso stands on a crag high above the western shore of Lake Como overlooking the little town of Ossuccio. It took shape in the seventeenth century as the outgrowth of a pre-existing sanctuary dedicated to the Virgin.¹²⁸ In this respect, the Sacro Monte of Ossuccio follows the pattern of Oropa, Crea, and Varese, which evolved out of pre-existing Marian sanctuaries. It was not a creation *ex novo* like Varallo or Orta.

The sanctuary at Ossuccio perhaps occupies the site of a pagan shrine dedicated to the goddess Ceres, mentioned by Pliny the Younger. It owed its status as a Christian shrine to two cult objects: a marble statue of the Virgin and Child, probably dating from the fourteenth century, and a fresco of the Virgin and Child with Saint Euphemia, from about 1500. According to local tradition, the statue was found in a cave by a deaf-mute shepherdess, who was miraculously cured by it. When the local people tried to carry the statue off, to place it in a shrine on the island in the lake, the Isola Comacina, it mysteriously made its way back, several times, to its original resting-place. This proof of its numinous power convinced the people to preserve it in a shrine at the place where it was discovered. This shrine later expanded into a church or oratory, with a few hermitages nearby; these buildings would become the nucleus of the sanctuary.¹²⁹ The presence of the hermitages, as in the early days at Varallo, strongly suggests that the sanctuary was Franciscan in origin: so too does the fact that the plan of the Sacro Monte built at Ossuccio in the seventeenth century mimics the Rosary sequence at the Capuchin Sacro Monte at Varese. In contrast to the other Sacri Monti, however, there was no monastery at Ossuccio. Spiritual care of the pilgrims would have been entrusted either to the Franciscans living in the hermitages or to one of the Franciscan or Capuchin houses in the area.

The first documentation relating to the sanctuary is the report of the visitation by Bishop Ninguarda of Como in 1593. He estimated that the church dated from around 1500. A cartouche in the church, however, states that it was built in 1537, 'through the piety of the local community', and that it was consecrated — or presumably reconsecrated after the nave was extended to accommodate increasing numbers of pilgrims — in 1699. In the early eighteenth century a bell tower and choir were added, together with a special chapel

¹²⁸ The Sacro Monte of Ossuccio is also known as Isola Comacina. 'Madonna del Soccorso' means 'Madonna of Aid, or Comfort'.

¹²⁹ Zanzaterra, 'Il Sacro Monte di Ossuccio', pp. 263–64.

for the statue of the Virgin and Child.¹³⁰ The church forms the end-point of the processional way with its sequence of fourteen chapels depicting the Mysteries of the Rosary winding up the steep hill above the lake.

The date for the construction of the first chapels at Ossuccio is given variously as 1623 or 1635. When Bishop Carafino of Como conducted a visitation in 1635, he noted that the designs of several chapels were ready for his approval, but his report does not specify which ones they were, or when work was to start on them.¹³¹ Financial support for their construction came in part from the local community, whose members would have volunteered their labour, and from various noble families, whose coats of arms adorn the chapels they commissioned. The Gilardone family of Valesio paid for the chapel of the Flagellation (no. 7), and the Crowning with Thorns (no. 8); Bernardo Brentano of Azzano commissioned the chapel of the Resurrection (no. 11); the Brentano-Moretto family the chapel of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane (no. 6). Andrea Cetti of Lenno paid for the chapels of the Ascent to Calvary (no. 9), the Crucifixion (no. 10), and the Ascension (no. 12).¹³² Other benefactors were Lorenzo Molinari of Sossana and Giovanni Antonio Trincano of Spurano, who was the father of Canon Andrea Trincano, prior of the monastery of Sant'Eufemia on the Isola Comacina, which had jurisdiction over the sanctuary, and who supervised the building of the Sacro Monte for more than half a century, from 1656 to 1710.

The other director of operations was Brother Timoteo Snider, a Swiss or German Capuchin who resided at the Sacro Monte from the middle of the seventeenth century until his death in 1682. He is described as 'sindaco e fabbricieri' in a document of 1680, and his part in the planning of the Sacro Monte is commemorated by a portrait of him in the church, holding the plan of a chapel in one hand and a pair of dividers in the other. He commissioned the artists, sculptors, and architects who worked on the Sacro Monte. He may have designed some of the chapels; others were designed by the sculptor Francesco Silva and his son Agostino.¹³³ Francesco Silva is perhaps the artist who modelled the figures in the chapels of the Annunciation (no. 1) and the Visitation (no. 2). His son succeeded him as the chief sculptor at Ossuccio, where he produced the statues for chapels 5 to 12, consisting of numerous human figures, plus several horses and

¹³⁰ Langé, *Sacri Monti piemontesi e lombardi*, p. 40.

¹³¹ Zanzaterra, 'Il Sacro Monte di Ossuccio', pp. 268–69.

¹³² He served in the Habsburg government, ending his career as director of the Mint in Vienna, 1660–65.

¹³³ Langé, *Sacri Monti piemontesi e lombardi*, p. 41; Zanzaterra, 'Il Sacro Monte di Ossuccio', p. 269, says Snider may have designed them.

dogs. His work does not rise to the aesthetic level of his father's. The faces of the figures in the chapel of the Crowning with Thorns (no. 8) are coarsely modelled; the viciousness of the torturers is rendered vigorously, but the man in the foreground making an obscene gesture and doffing his cap in mock reverence merely repeats the stock figure of the goitrous villain in Gaudenzio's Crucifixion chapel at Varallo. His Resurrection chapel (no. 11) is sparsely furnished with just a few scattered figures, diminishing the impact of the scene.

Construction at the Sacro Monte was initially directed by a board which was also responsible for keeping the accounts. Their record-keeping was unsystematic, so in 1644 Bishop Carafino ordered them to submit their accounts annually to his *vicario foraneo*. Nevertheless, the Sacro Monte's finances again fell into disarray, until order was imposed by Andrea Trincano when he became director of the Sacro Monte in 1656. In 1670 Bishop Torriani of Como set up a board to manage the Sacro Monte, with Timoteo Snider as chief *fabbriciere*. As at Varallo, disputes arose between the secular authorities, the *fabbricieri*, and the ecclesiastical authorities, the canons of Sant' Eufemia. The issues at stake sound familiar: both parties claimed jurisdiction over the sanctuary. The dispute eventually found its way to Rome, and in 1714 the Congregation of Rites delivered a verdict in favour of the *fabbricieri*, who commemorated their victory with a large marble plaque in the church.

By this time the Sacro Monte of Ossuccio was already complete, as Bishop Bonesana had noted during his visitation in 1699. Less than a century had elapsed since its foundation. After this point the historical record becomes obscure. It seems safe to assume that the sanctuary would have been secularized and sold off under Napoleon, as the others were, but this chapter in its history, and the circumstances that led to its subsequent preservation, still await investigation.

Belmonte

The Sacro Monte of Belmonte, founded in 1712 in the alpine foothills above the village of Valperga in Piedmont, is a latecomer to the constellation of Sacri Monti, chronologically the last in the group recognized by UNESCO. Its early history is obscure. The scanty information available suggests that it originated, like the Sacri Monti at Crea, Oropa, Varese, and Ossuccio, as a rural shrine where a statue of the Virgin was preserved.¹³⁴ It was supposedly founded in

¹³⁴ For the following account, see Mattioli Carcano and Trivellin, 'Il Sacro Monte di Nostra Signora di Belmonte'.

1016 by Marquis Arduino of Ivrea (955–1014, elected king of Italy in 1002), following an apparition of the Virgin which cured him of an illness, but this must be legend; Arduino was already dead by the presumptive date of the foundation. The first solid documentation informs us that in 1114 a community of Benedictine nuns from the abbey of San Tommaso at Busano, in the Po valley north of Turin, were occupying the sanctuary. We next hear of it in 1326 when Bishop Guido di Valperga of Asti rebuilt it and endowed it with lands, to fulfil a vow to the Virgin. He was joined in this effort by the abbot of Fruttuaria (today San Benigno Canavese, north of Turin), who brought the nuns at Belmonte under the jurisdiction of his abbey.¹³⁵

Fruttuaria fell into gradual decline, and its daughter house at Belmonte along with it. In 1601 the nuns were moved to new quarters nearby at Valperga, in accordance with the decree of the Council of Trent requiring female religious to live in closed communities. As the nuns departed, they attempted to carry with them the statue of the Virgin and Child that was kept at the sanctuary.¹³⁶ But in a scene reminiscent of what had occurred at Ossuccio, a divine portent — in this instance the darkening of the sky — warned them that the statue must remain where it was. They left Belmonte without it, and in May 1602 the local feudatory, the Count of Valperga, installed a community of Observant Franciscans in their place.

The Observants set about repairing and enlarging the sanctuary buildings, and laid out a Via Crucis, but initially this was just a series of stations marked out with posts. A century later the site was totally transformed by the guardian of the Observant monastery, Michel Angelo da Montiglio, who may have visited the Holy Land earlier in his career. He mobilized the people of Valperga and the surrounding communities to support the building of a Sacro Monte. On 19 June 1712, as a large crowd watched, the foundations were laid for the chapels or stations that were to form the Via Crucis. Under his vigorous leadership, work proceeded quickly: seven chapels had been built or started before he left the monastery in 1719. After this, the pace of work slackened, until the arrival of guardian Ferdinando Garrone, who directed a renewed spate of activ-

¹³⁵ Scolari, 'Il Sacro Monte di Belmonte a Valperga Canavese'. Cf. also *Le apparizioni di Ivrea e di Asti (Piemonte)* <<http://www.mariadinazareth.it/apparizione%20di%20ivrea%20ed%20asti.htm>> [accessed 7 October 2018]; *Parchi e Riserve del Canavese: Itinerari nella Riserva Naturale Speciale Sacro Monte di Belmonte* <http://www.parks.it/parchi.canavese/iti_dettaglio.php?id_iti=567> [accessed 3 April 2008].

¹³⁶ The image is perhaps from the twelfth century. It portrays the Virgin with the infant Jesus sitting frontally on her lap.

ity between 1759 and 1762. The chapels that line the Via Crucis are repetitions of the chapels at Varese, unoriginal and uninspired; their architects are unknown. They were frescoed by local artists but were not furnished with statues until well into the next century. In 1788 the sanctuary's image of the Virgin and Child was ceremonially crowned, evidently in imitation of the coronation of the image at Oropa.

The Observant monastery at Belmonte was suppressed in 1802, and its properties were sold in 1805, but they were redonated by the purchasers, led by the Count of Valperga, so that the sanctuary maintained some degree of financial stability.¹³⁷ The Observants returned after the Restoration, and the development of the sanctuary resumed. In 1825 the last of the chapels was built, completing the Via Crucis.¹³⁸ Statues were gradually placed in the chapels. Some of these were damaged by spectators who threw stones at the figures they deemed to be the enemies of Christ, so protective gratings had to be installed. In the years after 1875 the sanctuary church was rebuilt on a larger scale, with an imposing portico, and in 1877 work began on a completely new devotional route following the sequence of the Rosary, hacked through the granite on which the sanctuary stands and lined with painted representations of the Mysteries of the Rosary on posts.¹³⁹ Belmonte is thus the only Sacro Monte with two pilgrimage routes. Finally, in 1888, in another centenary celebration, the image of the Virgin was crowned again.

Graglia and Arona

The sanctuary at Graglia would have been by far the biggest and grandest of all the Sacri Monti had its founder's intentions been realized. He was the parish priest of the village of Graglia, Nicolao Vellotti. In 1615 he started construction there, in the mountains above Biella, close to Oropa, and in 1623 published an ambitious plan for the large-scale representation of the Holy Land he intended to build.¹⁴⁰ The foundation of the Sacro Monte at Oropa two years

¹³⁷ De Biaggi and Marzi, 'Belmonte', p. 15; Scolari, 'Il Sacro Monte di Belmonte', p. 193.

¹³⁸ Mattioli Carcano and Trivellin, 'Il Sacro Monte di Nostra Signora di Belmonte', p. 214, state this was chapel 13; Centini and Moncassoli Tibone, *Tra i prodigi dei Sacri Monti*, p. 39, state it was chapel 14.

¹³⁹ Langé, *Sacri Monti piemontesi e lombardi*, p. 43; Fattalini and Marzi, 'Domodossola', p. 24.

¹⁴⁰ The full title is *Trentatre umili dedicatorie della Nuova Gerusalemme o sia Palestina del Piemonte detta di San Carlo a Graglia ad honore delli trentatre anni di Cristo signor nostro*

earlier was probably the inspiration for Velotti's project, which, in a spirit of rivalry, he intended to make far bigger. It was to be a vast topographical representation of the Holy Land containing one hundred chapels relating all the events of Christ's life, from birth to Resurrection.¹⁴¹ Velotti's project looks like an attempt to reproduce Caimi's New Jerusalem on a gigantic scale: it clearly owed a great deal to the Franciscan model stemming from Varallo. Vellotti probably based his project on information gleaned from the maps and engravings of Palestine and the Holy Places which were then becoming available in Europe, and perhaps also on knowledge acquired during a visit he might have made to the Holy Land.¹⁴²

The title Vellotti gave to his project was 'The New Jerusalem or Palestine of Piedmont dedicated to San Carlo [Borromeo]'. The frontispiece of his plan depicts a double line of chapels converging on a large church; one line is labelled 'Galilea' and the other 'Passione'. One hundred chapels dot the area, and two big churches stand on nearby hilltops. Vellotti's description indicates that his Sacro Monte was to be more than just a pilgrims' itinerary retracing Christ's footsteps through a fictive Holy Land, with the surrounding mountains standing in for Tabor, Calvary, Mount Lebanon, and so on: it was to be an enormous religious theme park.¹⁴³

Velotti also intended his replica of the Holy Land to serve another purpose: to celebrate San Carlo Borromeo, canonized a few years earlier. He would have been aware that a sanctuary dedicated to the saint had just been founded at his birthplace, Arona, not far away on the southern shore of Lake Maggiore. Velotti's project therefore allotted a prominent place to a church dedicated to the saint. His New Jerusalem was thus a hybrid, combining a cult centre for the region's most revered saint with a symbolic itinerary through the Holy Land. Velotti also intended to incorporate an ancient Marian shrine into his project, rebuilt as a chapel dedicated to the Madonna of Loreto, with an image of the Virgin resembling the one at Oropa.¹⁴⁴ So Vellotti's Sacro Monte would have

undeci celesti, undeci ecclesiastiche et undeci temporali ('Thirty-Three Humble Dedications of the New Jerusalem or Palestine of Piedmont to San Carlo at Graglia in Honour of the Thirty-Three Years of Christ our Lord, Eleven Celestial, Eleven Ecclesiastical and Eleven Temporal'); Longo, 'Sagri Monti e devozione', p. 85.

¹⁴¹ Sciolla, *Il Biellese*, pp. 199–201.

¹⁴² Longo, *Memorie di Gerusalemme*, pp. 115–55.

¹⁴³ *Novella Gerusalemme o sia Palestina del Piemonte detta di San Carlo a Graglia*. The frontispiece is reproduced in Sciolla, *Il Biellese*, p. 197.

¹⁴⁴ Langé, *Sagri Monti piemontesi e lombardi*, p. 36. The wooden statue was carved in 1620

functioned as a multiple devotional system celebrating the life of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and San Carlo Borromeo, all situated in the topography of the Holy Land. And as if this were not enough, there were also dynastic overtones to his plan to recreate the Holy Land in the Piedmontese Alps: it may have been connected to a project his sovereign, Duke Charles Emanuel of Savoy, was pondering at that time for a crusade which would win the crown of Jerusalem for his House.¹⁴⁵

By the time Vellotti died in 1624, a few of the chapels had been built, apparently at his own expense. His immediate successors continued the work, but within a few years it stopped, due to a lack of money and the effects of the plague that struck Piedmont in 1629–30. What saved the Sacro Monte at Graglia from total oblivion was the patronage of the House of Savoy. Duke Charles Emanuel had expressed an interest in Vellotti's project, but it was his successors who resurrected the by-now moribund sanctuary. In 1654 the regent Maria Cristina commissioned the court architect Pietro Arduzzi, who was also working nearby at Oropa, to design a new church for the sanctuary at Graglia. Its foundation stone was laid in 1659 on the site Vellotti had designated as Nazareth.¹⁴⁶ As the church took shape in the later seventeenth century, four chapels with terracotta figures were built in its interior, representing the Nativity, the Adoration of the Magi, the Circumcision, and Jesus Disputing with the Doctors in the Temple. These were probably intended to form the starting-point for a sequence of chapels narrating the life of Christ, but only a few of them were ever built.

Construction of the church and a pilgrim hostel adjoining it proceeded slowly until 1741, when Carlo Giuseppe Gastaldi became the parish priest of Graglia and set about restoring the sanctuary. In 1765 the Turinese architect Bernardo Antonio Vittone (1705–70) was called in to give his opinion on the state of the buildings and the work that needed to be done.¹⁴⁷ He reported that money was short: the building of the church and the pilgrim lodgings were

by a Turinese artist: see *Santuario di Graglia* <<http://www.santuariodigraglia.it>> [accessed 8 September 2012].

¹⁴⁵ This project also involved the crown of Cyprus, on which his dynasty had a claim: see Oresko, 'The House of Savoy', pp. 288–89.

¹⁴⁶ Langé, *Sacri Monti piemontesi e lombardi*, p. 37; Sciolla, *Il Biellese*, pp. 201–03.

¹⁴⁷ See his 'Parere' (6 May 1765) in Sciolla, *Il Biellese*, pp. 204–14. Vittone worked entirely in his native Piedmont, designing a large number of churches and public buildings; Brayda, Coli, and Sesia, *Ingegneri e architetti del Sei e Settecento in Piemonte*, pp. 68–69; Pommer, *Eighteenth-Century Architecture in Piedmont*, pp. 259–84.

financed solely from alms and offerings, and there were no other sources of support. The church was at that time almost complete, but the façade was unfinished due to the shortage of funds. Vittone therefore advised that it would be best to spend the available money to finish the interior of the church, rather than the façade. He judged that the cupola was poorly proportioned and should be modified. The existing plan called for extending the pilgrim hostel and joining it to the church, but Vittone advised that the church should be left standing alone, to preserve its dignity and allow space for processions. In 1780 Fabbrizio Galliari completed the cupola, but the church was still far from complete when the revolutionary wars engulfed the region after 1796.

The Napoleonic regime secularized the sanctuary of Graglia and converted it into an Imperial college; after the Restoration in 1814 its religious function was restored. Work slowly resumed on the interior of the church: an organ was installed and the main altar rebuilt in marble, but the façade remains incomplete. Today the sanctuary at Graglia is still frequented by pilgrims, but no trace remains of Vellotti's grand project, apart from the church, the pilgrim hostel, and the ruins of a few chapels.

* * *

The sanctuary at Arona provides a different story, although it too is the forlorn remnant of an ambitious but never-fulfilled project. The Sacro Monte of Arona was the brainchild of Marco Aurelio Grattarola (1549–1615), born into a family of notaries in the village of Margno in the Valsassina, east of Lake Como. Ordained in 1582 by Carlo Borromeo, he became one of his confidants and a member of the Oblati di Sant'Ambrogio, an order founded by Borromeo as the *corps d'élite* of his clergy.¹⁴⁸ After the archbishop's death Grattarola became an intimate of Federico Borromeo and played a central part in the negotiations for Carlo Borromeo's canonization in 1610. This event inspired him to draw up his project for a Sacro Monte dedicated to Borromeo at Arona, his birthplace.¹⁴⁹ Federico Borromeo gave the project his enthusiastic support, and on 12 July 1614 he laid the foundation stone for the church dedicated to San Carlo, which was to become the nucleus of the sanctuary and the starting-point for the projected pilgrims' route.

¹⁴⁸ Pasetti and Uberti, *Cenni biografici*; on the Oblati, see *Statuti degli Oblati di S. Ambrogio*, ed. by Fumagalli.

¹⁴⁹ This was his *Informatione dell'origine e progresso della fabbrica del Sacro Monte di San Carlo*, cited by Gentile, 'I misteri mariani del Sacro Monte di Crea dal Trattato di Costantino Massino', p. 90.

Grattarola's plan envisaged a sequence of fifteen chapels along a processional way interspersed with three triumphal arches.¹⁵⁰ The plans for the church and the Sacro Monte were drawn by Francesco Maria Richini (1549–1639), the leading architect in Milan at that time, head of the cathedral workshop, and a favourite of Federico Borromeo. As his model he took Bernascone's Sacro Monte at Varese, then under construction, but with a crucial difference. The fifteen chapels punctuated by three triumphal arches that he planned for Arona did not represent the Rosary sequence, as at Varese; instead, they were to represent the key events of Borromeo's life, from his birth, through his renunciation of his worldly goods and titles (reminiscent of the similar chapel of Saint Francis at Orta), his central role in the Council of Trent, his entry into Milan as archbishop, and his canonization. The three surviving chapels show that Richini's designs were replications of Bernascone's chapels at Varese.¹⁵¹ A contemporary engraving shows the chapels and arches lining a serpentine pathway like a flattened letter S winding up the hillside above Lake Maggiore. But the project was also to include another group of chapels, the *Eremo* or hermitage in the woodlands on the far side of the hill, to commemorate Borromeo's contemplative life.¹⁵² As part of the Sacro Monte, Federico Borromeo established a seminary across the piazza from the church of San Carlo, which opened its doors in 1643.

The focus of the entire project was a gigantic statue of the saint, known as the 'Sancarlone', which overlooks the lake and is visible for miles around. It was designed by Giovanni Battista Crespi, 'il Cerano', another of Federico Borromeo's favourite artists, and is an example of the vogue for colossal statuary in Milan in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Federico Borromeo envisaged it as modelled on the Colossus of Rhodes, to be visible from far across the lake.¹⁵³ This gigantic figure portrays the saint carrying a large volume under his left arm and raising his right hand in benediction. It is an impressive feat of engineering. Crespi designed it around a stone core supporting a framework of iron rods, onto which preshaped copper plates were to be riveted, to form the outer shell of the gigantic figure. Ladders were con-

¹⁵⁰ On Richini's role at Arona, see Langé, 'I progettisti del Sacro Monte di Arona'.

¹⁵¹ Langé and Pensa, *Sacro Monte*, pp. 34–36.

¹⁵² Longo, *Memorie di Gerusalemme*, pp. 85–86.

¹⁵³ Langé, *Sacri Monti piemontesi e lombardi*, pp. 34–35. Tuniz, 'La fortuna del Sacro Monte di Varallo', p. 110. The statue measures 35 m. in height, including the plinth. It is the second-largest free-standing metal statue in the world, after the Statue of Liberty in New York.



Figure 7.10. Statue of San Carlo Borromeo, Arona. Photo by Alamy Ltd.

structed inside the statue to allow visitors to climb to its head, from which they could admire the panorama of the lake through apertures in the eyes and ears. It took almost a century to build. Circumstances quickly conspired to thwart Grattarola's plan. His death in 1615, a year after the inauguration of the Sacro Monte, deprived the project of its moving spirit. Work was slowed by the war in Lombardy, the plague, the deepening economic recession, and the death of Federico Borromeo in 1631. A few of the projected chapels were constructed: they were used to quarantine the victims of the plague and suffered serious damage.

In 1644 the project suffered another setback when marauding soldiers carried off the copper plates that were to form the outer carapace of the statue, from where they were stored in the church.¹⁵⁴ In 1690 work on the statue resumed at the instigation of the Borromeo family, and in May 1698 it was inaugurated.¹⁵⁵ The church was completed in 1725, but this marked the end of any efforts to continue Grattarola's project. After the ancestral castle of the Borromeo family at Arona was demolished under Napoleon, a replica of the room in which Carlo Borromeo was born was built in the church, and the seminary buildings were extended, but the shells of the chapels fell into ruin. Today the enormous statue of San Carlo, alone and isolated, keeps watch over the site where the Sacro Monte dedicated to him was to have stood.

Similarities and Differences

The Sacro Monte that Bernardino Caimi founded at Varallo in the late fifteenth century became the inspiration and the prototype for the second generation of Sacri Monti that appeared in the western Alps a century later. The motives that led to the foundation of these new sanctuaries differed widely, as did their developmental trajectories. But two spiritual threads unite them: first, the devotional culture of the Franciscan order, in its Observant or Capuchin forms; second, the militant religiosity of the archdiocese of Milan during the Counter-Reformation.

¹⁵⁴ Its author was Graziano Ponzone, archpriest of Arona, cited in Langé, *Sacri Monti piemontesi e lombardi*, p. 35. Cf. the details at *San Carlo, il progetto del Sacro Monte* <www.aronanelweb.it/san-carlo> [accessed 28 August 2012].

¹⁵⁵ See the background in Agosti, 'Colossi di Lombardia'; she states (pp. 179–80) that the statue of San Carlo was originally to be made of marble.

Varallo was the product of Observant Franciscan spirituality, a concrete embodiment of the order's methods of preaching and religious instruction. Bernardino Caimi designed it as a schematic representation of the Holy Places to launch its visitors on a mental pilgrimage, through which they would experience the sufferings of Christ and the miracle of human redemption. Soon, however, his programme underwent a radical transformation, taking on a more physical, direct form, less dependent on the pilgrims' imaginative ability to recreate and participate in the Passion. By the mid-sixteenth century Caimi's topomimetic schema had evolved into a sequence of chapels that told the story of Christ's life and Passion in tableaux of sculpted and painted images. Evocation shifted to realistic representation, from manipulation of the imagination to a highly realistic appeal to the senses.

This devotional-didactic system based on physical representation, deriving from Observant Franciscan spirituality and perfected at Varallo, became the model for the second generation of Sacri Monti, but with a difference: the later Sacri Monti developed under the impulse of the Counter-Reformation, in the intense form propagated by Carlo Borromeo in the archdiocese of Milan. Testimony to the depth of the archbishop-saint's influence on this second generation of Sacri Monti are the two sanctuaries dedicated to him at Graglia and Arona, stillborn though they were. Borromeo himself did not found any of the Sacri Monti, but his ardent spirituality inspired the creation and the artistic development of the next generation of sanctuaries. His successor Federico Borromeo followed in his cousin's footsteps and took an active part in fostering the Sacri Monti at Varallo, Orta, and Varese. But neither of the Borromeo archbishops viewed the sanctuaries as a spiritual barrier stemming the advance of heresy. The long temporal arc of development and the divergent origins of the second generation of Sacri Monti demonstrate that they were not planned as a unified project but were the result of disparate local initiatives.

To create and then successfully develop a Sacro Monte was expensive. The prosperity of a sanctuary depended on the revenues it could attract. Every Sacro Monte relied on the offerings of pilgrims, drawn to it by its reputation as a sacred site, as at Varallo, or by a venerated cult object as at Crea or Oropa, or by the indulgences it offered for the remission of sins. But these were not steady sources of income. A sanctuary that depended on the offerings of pilgrims or pious bequests was vulnerable to fluctuations in its revenues caused by war, plague, or economic recession: these revenues alone were insufficient to maintain or expand its fabric. The decline of the Sacro Monte at Crea, and the slow pace of development at the Monte Calvario of Domodossola in the eight-

eenth century, are cases in point. A sanctuary needed other sources of income to assure its financial stability.

The Sacro Monte at Varallo benefitted from its diverse financial base. It flourished thanks not only to the offerings of pilgrims and the bequests of pious donors, but also to the support of the town council, the d'Adda family and other local notables, and Valsesians living far from home. Similarly the Sacro Monte at Orta was sustained in part by the town council and prominent citizens. Some sanctuaries benefitted from the gifts of individual patrons: Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga at Crea, Amico Canobio at Orta, Giovanni Matteo Capis at Domodossola, the Milanese patricians, and the local communities that commissioned chapels at Varese. This type of patronage had its limitations, however. Local communities or wealthy patrons would commission the building and decoration of individual chapels, but their generosity ended there: they made no provision for the repairs and maintenance that became necessary with the passage of time. The sustained patronage of successive generations of the Scarognini and d'Adda families at Varallo is an exception to this rule; other sanctuaries were less fortunate.

From the later sixteenth century, the single most important patron of the alpine sanctuaries was the House of Savoy. Successive Savoyard rulers patronized Varallo to display their zeal for the Counter-Reformation and as a way to expand their influence into a territory they coveted, the duchy of Milan. After they acquired the Val Sesia in 1707, they tightened their control over the Sacro Monte of Varallo at the expense of the religious and political authorities that had hitherto directed it, eventually making it almost an outgrowth of their state machinery. Their patronage of the sanctuaries at Oropa and Graglia proclaimed their religious ardour and their dynastic pride, but with very divergent outcomes. At Graglia their patronage ensured the survival of the Sacro Monte, albeit in a highly attenuated form, whereas at Oropa their largesse produced the grandest of all the Sacri Monti, a vast palatial complex that gave concrete form to the political ambitions and the religious aspirations of the House of Savoy.

Varallo and the later Sacri Monti are linked artistically by a common denominator: they were largely created by architects, artists, and sculptors from the alpine valleys or Lombardy. Only a few artists who worked at these sanctuaries hailed from outside the region: Alessi and Alfieri at Varallo, Tabacchetti at Varallo and Crea, Juvarra and Vittone at Oropa. Samuel Butler was therefore correct to argue that the alpine environment was the social and cultural matrix from which the art of the Sacri Monti grew. They were all the products of the rich artistic traditions of Lombardy and the alpine valleys, from the Val Sesia to

Lugano and Como. The careers of many of the leading artists who worked at the Sacri Monti tended to conform to a common pattern, whether they came from the Val Sesia, Milan, or Lombardy: an *iter* that took them as promising youths to Rome, where they served their artistic apprenticeships, followed by the return to their homeland, to work at the Sacri Monti and other religious sites in Lombardy. For some of the sculptors, this *iter* would also include a period in the cathedral workshop at Milan. The careers of the Valsesians Gaudenzio Ferrari and Tanzio da Varallo, and the Lombards Morazzone and Bussola, all followed this pattern. Giovanni d'Enrico, who seems never to have ventured beyond his alpine homeland, is the great exception.

Another common denominator unites the different Sacri Monti: they are all based on the formula of a sequence of chapels pioneered at Varallo, and through a lexicon of forms and modes of representation they all shared, resulting from what we might term a process of artistic cross-fertilization as builders, painters, and sculptors moved between the different sanctuaries. To cite the most important examples: Giovanni d'Enrico and his brother Melchiorre worked at Varallo and Oropa; Morazzone at Varallo and Varese; the della Rovere brothers at Varallo, Orta, and Varese; the Nuvolone brothers at Orta and Varese; Bussola at Varallo, Orta, Varese, and Domodossola. In this way the stylistic model of Varallo deriving from the work of Gaudenzio Ferrari and Tabacchetti was diffused through the later Sacri Monti, making them immediately recognizable as local derivatives of the same prototype, and imparting an underlying unity, which UNESCO recognized when it grouped them together as a World Heritage Site.

REVOLUTION AND RESTORATION

The French invasion of Italy in 1796 opened a new era in the history of the Val Sesia, Varallo, and its Sacro Monte. Over the next four years northern Italy fell subject to a succession of short-lived regimes representing diametrically opposed political ideologies. In April 1796 Napoleon Bonaparte defeated the Savoyard state in a lightning campaign. In June he defeated the Austrian army in Lombardy, occupied Milan, and proclaimed it the capital of the new Cisalpine Republic he was founding. As Napoleon's army pursued the retreating Austrians across the Lombard plain, little groups of revolutionaries in many places — including Quarona in the Val Sesia — hailed the dawn of a new era and erected Liberty Trees in celebration. In 1798 the French army occupied Piedmont and forced its king into exile. The Old Regime in northern Italy had collapsed with surprising speed.

Reaction swiftly followed. In the spring of 1799 an Austro-Russian invasion overthrew the Cisalpine Republic, restored Habsburg rule over Lombardy, and occupied Piedmont. This bid to restore the old order did not last, however. In 1800 Napoleon returned to Italy, defeated the Austrians at Marengo, and established a new Italian Republic, the successor to the Cisalpine, with himself as its president. In 1805 he transformed the republic into the Kingdom of Italy, and had himself crowned as its sovereign. He annexed Piedmont and integrated it into France. He divided the regions of Italy ruled by France into administrative departments headed by prefects. The Napoleonic Code replaced the heterogeneous legal systems of the Old Regime. Political stability returned and French hegemony in northern Italy was assured, for a time.

As a tiny enclave, first in the Italian Republic and then the Kingdom of Italy, the Val Sesia was absorbed into the expanding Napoleonic empire.

On 25 January 1801 the General Council and the Board of Regents of the Val Sesia were dissolved, and a French-style municipal government was installed at Varallo.¹ Under the new departmental administration the valley was divided arbitrarily down the line of the river Sesia: the western area was joined to French-occupied Piedmont, the eastern area to the Italian Republic. The valley's leaders protested at this disregard for their privileges, and at the dire economic consequences the division would cause, but in vain. Their gloomy forecast was soon proved correct. Division dealt a further blow to the valley's economy, already suffering from wartime shortages and the disruption of trade and the flow of migrant labour. Poverty was exacerbated by the heavy taxation imposed by the Napoleonic regime and by serious famines in 1809 and 1811. The valley's population fell.²

In April 1814 the Napoleonic empire collapsed. Rioters overthrew the municipal government in Varallo. The Savoyard monarch Victor Emanuel I returned to his domains, but the restoration of the monarchy did not signify the restoration of the Old Regime: the jurisdictional tension between religious and political authorities, fundamental to Savoyard absolutism in the previous century, was a thing of the past. Enlightened absolutism was replaced by clericalism and reaction, as Church and state worked together to repress any hint of revolution. Borrowing its methods from the Napoleonic system of government, the crown tightened its control over the provinces, made their administrations uniform, and eliminated enclaves of privilege. In June 1815 the leaders of the Val Sesia attempted to revive its traditional system of government by electing a Board of Regents. But this exercise in political nostalgia did not last. Three years later Victor Emanuel I dissolved the Regents and the General Council, and made the Val Sesia a province administered directly from Turin. The office of the *pretore* was abolished, bringing the administration of the valley into line with the rest of the state.³ Its four centuries as a *terra separata* were over.

The Sacro Monte of Varallo weathered these difficult years battered but fundamentally intact. It fared better than the other Sacri Monti in the region. Charles Emanuel III's reform of Varallo's Sacro Monte had produced an unintended benefit: because it was a community of secular priests, it escaped the confiscation of monastic properties that began under the revolutionary regimes and gathered momentum under Napoleon. In April 1806 Eugène

¹ Bonola, 'L'eversione dell'asse ecclesiastico di Varallo in età napoleonica', p. 225.

² Rizzi, *Storia della Valsesia*, pp. 343–55.

³ Soffietti, 'La lunga durata degli statuti di Borgosesia', p. 103.

de Beauharnais, Napoleon's stepson and his viceroy in the Kingdom of Italy, decreed the secularization of properties belonging to monastic orders and religious confraternities: a year later, he dissolved them outright. The Reformed Observants of Santa Maria delle Grazie at Varallo fell victim to this decree. Its buildings were sold and the Brothers dispersed; the community would not be reconstituted for a considerable time. The confraternities of the Santissima Trinità and Santa Marta at Varallo were also dissolved. The latter's property was transferred to the Sacro Monte, because of the sanctuary's artistic value.⁴

Reflecting at the end of the nineteenth century on the 'travails' that had befallen the clergy of the Val Sesia during the revolutionary and Napoleonic era, the Catholic author of a history of the Sacro Monte preferred to pass this period over in silence, as too dreadful to contemplate.⁵ But the tribulations he lamented, dire though they were, did not last. With the Restoration, a renewed spirituality infused with a mystical Romantic sensibility spread across Europe: the Church regained its moral authority and began to recover its properties and endowments. The devotional life of the Sacro Monte revived. In 1819 the bishop of Novara installed a community of Oblates of San Carlo and San Gaudenzio to minister to the pilgrims who were now returning to the sanctuary. A new guide-book to the Sacro Monte appeared.⁶ The Piedmontese patriot, poet, and dramatist Silvio Pellico (1789–1854) visited the sanctuary soon after his release from captivity in an Austrian dungeon and penned a poem paying homage to the pilgrims' deep piety. He also wrote a hagiographic study of the iconic Valsesian martyr the Blessed Panasia, a shepherdess murdered by her wicked stepmother because of her religious faith.⁷ In 1836 King Charles Albert

⁴ De Filippis, 'Il Sacro Monte di Varallo Sesia', p. 149; Bonola, 'L'eversione dell'asse ecclesiastico di Varallo in età napoleonica', p. 229. The Brothers had to sell off two paintings by Tanzio: Portrait of a Young Man and The Martyrdom of the Franciscans at Nagasaki.

⁵ Chiara, *Dell'importanza monumentale del Sacro Monte di Varallo*, p. 16; '[...] dello scombussolamento [...] in ogni ordine di cose e di idee [...] intendiamo non parlare'.

⁶ Bossi, 'La Valsesia e il francescanesimo', p. 139. They were an offshoot of the Oblates of Sant'Ambrogio founded by Carlo Borromeo. The guide-book is the anonymous *Guida per ben visitare la Nuova Gerusalemme nel Sacro Monte di Varallo* and its revised edition, *Guida per ben visitare la Nuova Gerusalemme nel Sacro Monte di Varallo, esposta alla pietà de' fedeli*.

⁷ Pellico was imprisoned in the Spielberg fortress from 1820 to 1830. His poem was probably written in 1834 during a summer visit to Varallo, as secretary to Tancredi Fallelli di Barolo, and is entitled *Il Sacro Monte di Varallo: Carme*. His *Notizie intorno alla beata Panasia pastorella valsesiana nativa di Quarona* was originally published in 1837; cf. Baldissone and Scanzio, 'La Valsesia "cultrice di pietà e di Belle Arti"', pp. 306–07.

made a state visit to Varallo, signalling the monarchy's wholehearted participation in the religious revival which the Sacro Monte had come to embody.

Across Europe the religious reawakening stimulated an interest in the Christian art of earlier centuries, construed as a golden age when faith was uncorrupted by the materialism and free thinking unleashed by the Enlightenment. In the Val Sesia this new sensibility naturally centred on the art of the Sacro Monte and on the exemplary figure of Gaudenzio Ferrari, whose art was viewed as springing from his deep Christian faith. As a native son of the Val Sesia he was a source of deep local pride, which gradually took the form of what we might almost term a cult. The first study celebrating Gaudenzio, by Gaudenzio Bordiga (1773–1837), was published in 1821. To magnify his hero's importance as more than a local artist and place him centrally in the context of the High Renaissance, Bordiga repeated the legend that Gaudenzio had spent years in Rome perfecting his art in the company of his friend Raphael, and (following Lomazzo) that he was not merely a painter but a philosopher and mathematician too.⁸ In 1835 Bordiga published a second study of Gaudenzio, illustrated with engravings. These two studies represent the first secular appreciation of Gaudenzio's art, part of the emerging discipline of scientific art history. In 1830 Bordiga also published a guide-book to the sanctuary. Unlike the numerous guide-books published since the early sixteenth century, whose purpose was primarily devotional, Bordiga's was historical and artistic.⁹ His work started a trend. In 1858 the painter Michele Cusa (1799–1872) published a study of the Sacro Monte and Gaudenzio's work there, illustrated with lithographs, which he addressed to 'cultivated persons devoted to the arts and to the progress of the human community'. The aim of his publication was also to solicit funds from the government to undertake much-needed restoration of the chapels on the Sacro Monte, and to that end he asserted — somewhat optimistically — that the art of the Val Sesia stood on a par with that of Rome and Bologna.¹⁰

⁸ Gaudenzio Maria Bordiga, *Notizie intorno alle opere di Gaudenzio Ferrari pittore e plastificatore*, p. 17.

⁹ Gaudenzio Maria Bordiga, *Storia e guida del Sacro Monte di Varallo*; cf. Longo, *Memorie di Gerusalemme*, p. 85.

¹⁰ See the preface to Cusa, *Il Sacro Monte di Varallo*. The donors who supported its publication are listed at the end of the book. Cusa was born at Rimella in the Val Sesia and trained at Varallo's drawing school. He studied in Rome and became a court painter to King Charles Albert, then secretary and professor of drawing at the Accademia Albertina in Turin: Debiaggi, *Dizionario degli artisti valsesiani*, p. 38.

In 1881 Giuseppe Colombo published the first historical study of Gaudenzio, based on archival documents, which he printed as an appendix.¹¹

The citizens of Varallo honoured Gaudenzio as the region's pre-eminent artist, the glory of their *patria*. In 1866 a bronze statue of him was placed beside the portico of the first chapel of the Sacro Monte, with a statue of Bernardino Caimi on the other side. Another statue of him was ceremonially erected outside Santa Maria delle Grazie in 1874, at the centre of a piazza that was named after him. In 1845 the members of Varallo's School of Drawing (the Società per l'Incoraggiamento del Disegno) had unveiled a bust of Gaudenzio in its hall.¹² This institution was the start of a movement to develop local artistic talent and stimulate pride in the Val Sesia's artistic tradition. Founded in 1831, the School of Drawing was the successor to the academy established in 1778 to train local artists. A few years later, in 1836, the charitable Marquis Tancredi Fallelli di Barolo, Silvio Pellico's patron, set up an academy at Varallo to train students in the traditional art of woodcarving. In 1878 an institution for the conservation and restoration of works of art was established. The growing consciousness of the importance of the Val Sesia's artistic heritage was crowned in 1884 when the Italian state recognized nine of the chapels on the Sacro Monte as national monuments. A year later the municipal art gallery (Pinacoteca) was opened at Varallo. Its founder, and the compiler of its catalogue, was the painter Giulio Arienta (1826–1900), the friend of Samuel Butler.¹³

The moving spirit behind these cultural initiatives came from the circle of local intellectuals, men like Arienta, who devoted themselves to celebrating and promoting the art and culture of their *patria*. They were new men from new families, operating in a new public sphere of institutions and associations that they themselves were creating. The upheavals of the revolutionary period and the dissolution of the Board of Regents put an end to the ascendancy of the valley's traditional elite and opened the way for the rise of families active in trade, manufacturing, and the professions. The economy and social structure of the Val Sesia were changing, slowly but perceptibly. Both migrant labour, the mainstay of the economy, and the old industries of mining and metallurgy

¹¹ Colombo, *Vita ed opere di Gaudenzio Ferrari*.

¹² Luigi Mallé, *Incontri con Gaudenzio*, p. 270. It was founded by the local engraver Giacomo Geniani; Rizzi, *Storia della Valsesia*, p. 374.

¹³ De Filippis, 'Il Sacro Monte di Varallo Sesia', pp. 148–49. These were the chapels in which Gaudenzio, Morazzone, and Tanzio had worked. On Arienta, see Debiaggi, *Dizionario degli artisti valsesiani*, p. 7.

were expanding, while new industries were taking root. Paper-making, silk-spinning, and cotton textile production developed along the Mastallone and the Sesia, benefitting from their abundant water. Wool production increased in the southern part of the valley, to supply the textile mills of Biella and a new wool-combing factory established at Borgosesia in 1849. In the late nineteenth century several more textile plants were built at the lower end of the valley, relying on newly available electrical power rather than water-power from the Sesia.¹⁴

The leader of the movement to preserve and celebrate the culture of the Val Sesia was the indefatigable polymath Pietro Calderini (1824–1906). The son of a surgeon from Borgosesia, he was educated by the Jesuits and ordained priest in 1850, but in 1859 he gave up his pastoral duties to devote himself to teaching and directing Varallo's new Technical School. A man of inexhaustible energy and deep local pride, he set out to promote every aspect of Valsesian culture and to create institutions dedicated to preserving it.¹⁵ A prolific orator, he delivered speeches on every civic occasion. Naturally he was the dignitary called on to pronounce the celebratory discourse at the opening of the railway link from Novara to Varallo in 1886. He was also a journalist. With two colleagues he founded a weekly newspaper, 'Il Monte Rosa', in 1861, which was later relaunched under the significant title of 'Gaudenzio Ferrari', and subsequently as the 'Corriere Valsesiano'. On his initiative a museum of natural history, which still stands today, was established at Varallo in 1865. His scientific interests extended to botany, geology, and meteorology (he founded three weather observation stations in different parts of the valley). He was also an avid mountaineer; in 1867 he became a founding member of the Valsesian branch of the recently formed Italian Alpine Club, and would remain an active member for the rest of his life.

Calderini was particularly devoted to conserving and publicizing the Val Sesia's artistic heritage. He was a member of the committee that drafted regulations for the administration of the Sacro Monte in 1868, and two years later, for the conservation of its works of art. In the following year he submitted a report to the intendant of Novara on the valley's monuments and antiquities. In 1875 he and Giulio Arienta co-founded the Society for the Preservation of Works of Art and Monuments in the Valsesia (Società per la Conservazione

¹⁴ Rizzi, *Storia della Valsesia*, pp. 387–90.

¹⁵ 'Pietro Calderini, biografia e bibliografia', in Fantoni and others, *D'acqua e di pietra*, pp. 30–39; cf. Rizzi, *Storia della Valsesia*, p. 403.

delle Opere d'Arte e dei Monumenti), and with his support Arienta went on to found Varallo's art gallery in 1900. Calderini organized the festivities in August 1885, for what was believed at that time to be the four hundredth anniversary of Gaudenzio Ferrari's birth, and he was the natural choice to act as guide for Queen Margherita when she visited the Sacro Monte in 1892. Although he evinced no particular interest in history, he supported the historians Antonio Carestia (1825–1908) and Federico Tonetti in their efforts to collect and catalogue documents relating to the valley's history. Tonetti's *Storia della Vallesesia e dell'Alto Novarese*, first published in instalments between 1875 and 1881, broke away from the self-celebratory tradition that had characterized the historiography of the Val Sesia since Fassola. Tonetti subjected the mythic topoi of the valley's ancient freedom to critical scrutiny, basing his account for the first time on archival documents and local statutes. He would later compile an invaluable bibliography of the literature on the Val Sesia¹⁶

When Samuel Butler arrived in Varallo in the summer of 1871, he encountered this milieu of artists, erudites, and experts on the culture, art, and lore of the Val Sesia. They would be his guides as he explored the artistic heritage of Varallo and the Sacro Monte. Pietro Calderini and Dionigi Negri, Giulio Arienta and Costantino Durio, Federico Tonetti and Pietro Galloni, Giuseppe Antonini and Antonio Carestia: these men became his friends and lent him their indispensable advice as he pursued his study of the art they held so dear.¹⁷ And as he happily acknowledged, without their guidance he could not have written *Alps and Sanctuaries* and *Ex Voto*, the path-breaking works that first made the outside world aware of the Val Sesia's unique artistic heritage.

¹⁶ Piemontino, 'La Valsesia', pp. 44–46.

¹⁷ See the list of Butler's friends in Durio, *Samuele Butler*, p. 10.

CAIMI'S PLAN FOR THE SACRO MONTE, VARALLO¹

According to Casimiro Debiaggi, Caimi's original plan for the chapels in the different areas of the Sacro Monte consisted of these designated areas:

<i>Nazareth</i>	The Annunciation
<i>Bethlehem</i>	The Nativity
<i>Jerusalem</i>	The Holy Sepulchre, Calvary, Stone of the Anointment, <i>Noli Me Tangere</i> , Christ Appearing to the Virgin
<i>Gethsemane</i>	Disciples (in the area now occupied by Pilate's Palace)
<i>Valley of Jehosaphat and Cedron</i>	Tombs of the Virgin, and of Joachim and Anna
<i>Mount of Olives</i>	The Risen Christ Appearing to the Disciples, the Angel Announcing Her Imminent Death to the Virgin, the Ascension, the Teaching of the <i>Pater Noster</i> , the Teaching of the Credo
<i>Mount Zion</i>	The Last Supper, Pentecost, the Dormition and Assumption of the Virgin

¹ Debiaggi, 'Sacro Monte di Varallo', pp. 246–49.



Map 2. Plan of the Sacro Monte of Varallo, present state. Adapted from Galeazzo Alessi, *Libro dei Misteri: Progetto di pianificazione urbanistica, architettonica e figurativa del Sacro Monte di Varallo Sesia (1565–1569)*, ed. by Stefania Stefani Perrone, 2 vols (Bologna: Arnaldo Forni, 1974), I, pianta 8.

PLAN OF THE SACRO MONTE VARALLO: PRESENT STATE

1. Chapel of the Fall of Man
2. The Annunciation
3. The Visitation
4. Joseph's First Dream
5. The Magi
6. The Nativity
7. The Adoration of the Shepherds
8. The Presentation in the Temple
(formerly Circumcision)
9. Joseph's Second Dream
10. The Flight into Egypt
11. The Massacre of the Innocents
12. The Baptism of Christ
13. The Temptation of Christ
14. The Curing of the Paralyzed Man
15. Christ and the Samaritan Woman
16. The Raising of the Son of the
Widow of Naim
17. The Transfiguration
18. The Resurrection of Lazarus
19. The Entry into Jerusalem
20. The Last Supper
21. The Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane
22. The Sleeping Disciples
23. The Capture of Christ
24. Christ before Annas
25. Christ before Caiaphas
26. Peter's Repentance
27. Christ's First Appearance before Pilate
28. Christ before Herod
29. Christ's Second Appearance before Pilate
30. The Flagellation
31. The Crowning with Thorns
32. Christ Led to the Pretorium
33. Ecce Homo
34. Pilate Washing his Hands
35. The Condemnation of Christ
36. The Ascent to Calvary
37. The Nailing to the Cross
38. The Crucifixion
39. The Deposition
40. The Pietà
41. Christ Laid in the Shroud
42. The Altar of St Francis
43. The Holy Sepulchre
- A. Hotel Sacro Monte
- B. Main Entrance Portal
- C. Basilica of the Virgin
- D. Monastery
- E. Pilgrim Hospice
- F. Golden Gate
- G. Fountain of the Risen Christ
- H. Administration Building
(Casa Valgrana)
- I. Cableway Terminal
- J. Tomb of the Virgin
- K. Secondary Entrance
- L. Chapel of Cesare Maggi
- M. Piazza della Basilica
(Piazza Giovanni Paolo II)
- N. Piazza dei Tribunali

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ADN	Archivio Diocesano di Novara
ASM	Archivio di Stato di Milano
AST Corte	Archivio di Stato di Torino, Sezione Corte
ASV	Archivio di Stato di Varallo
BBM	Biblioteca di Brera Milano
BRT	Biblioteca Reale di Torino

Periodicals

<i>BSBS</i>	Bollettino storico-bibliografico subalpino, 116 vols (Turin: Deputazione Subalpina di Storia Patria, 1896–2018) .
<i>BSPN</i>	Bollettino storico per la provincia di Novara, 75 vols (Novara: Società Storica .Novarese, 1907–35, 1947–2018)
<i>DBI</i>	<i>Dizionario biografico degli Italiani</i> , 80 vols (Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 1960–2018)

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INDEX OF PERSONS

- Aaron: 157
 Abel: 157
 Abimelech: 137–39
 Adam: 95, 109–10, 120, 136, 220
 Adorno, Pietro: 67
 Aguggiari, Giovanni Battista: 234–36, 242–43
 Alberganti, family: 24, 27, 169, 172–73, 176, 180, 190, 200
 Alberganti, Alberto: 169
 Alberganti, Giacomo: 173
 Alberganti, Silvestro: 173, 177
 Alberti, Leon Battista: 67
 Alciati, *Illuminata*: 241
 Alessi, Galeazzo: xii, 100–13, 119, 125, 128, 137, 146, 182, 205, 259
 Alfani, Domenico di Orazio: 146
 Alferi, Benedetto: 187, 189, 259
 Ambrose, St: 232, 241
 Andreas-Salomé, Lou: 218
 Anna of Monferrato, Marchioness: 61
 Annoni, Gian Angelo: 236
 Antonini, Giuseppe: 267
 Arduino of Ivrea: 250
 Arduzzi, Pietro: 227, 253
 Arienta, Giulio: 15, 265–67
 Arrigoni, Giuseppe: 182
 Augustinian canons: 219, 232, 236
 Auregio, Bartolomeo: 226
 Auregio, Pietro Giuseppe: 226
 Avondo, Giovanni: 194
 Balbis Bertone, Marco Aurelio, Bishop of Novara: 30, 200, 202–03
 Baldi, Bernardino: 65
 Baldo, family: 167
 Bandello, Matteo: 61
 Bardi, family: 69
 Bargnola, Giacomo: 146
 Bascapè, Carlo, Bishop of Novara: 28–33, 65, 75, 92, 97, 105, 113, 120–21, 123–49, 154, 157, 159, 166, 181, 183, 194, 206, 210–12, 231, 236, 243
 Bassi, Martino: 112–13
 Battisti, Eugenio: 94
 Beccaria, Agostino (Agosto): 162
 Beltrami, Pietro Giuseppe: 227
 Beraudo di Pralormo, Filippo, Count: 176–79
 Berenson, Bernard: 7, 69, 77
 Beretta, Carlo (Il Berettone): 217
 Bernardino of Siena, St: 42, 59
 Bernascone, Giuseppe (Il Mancino): 235–36, 240, 242, 255
 Bernero, Giovanni Battista: 183
 Bernini, Lorenzo: 184
 Betti, Sigismondo: 183
 Bianchi, Isidoro: 239
 Bianchi, Marco: 186–87
 Bigiogero, Domenico: 241
 Bimia, Benedetta: 241
 Bodmer, family: 31
 Bogino, Giambattista: 193
 Bona Castellotti, Marco: 152

- Bonaparte, Napoleon: 23, 25, 221, 228,
 246, 249, 254, 257, 261–63
 Bonaventura, St: 82 n. 24, 209, 210 n. 22,
 212, 213 n. 34, 214 n. 35, 215 n. 38,
 216 n. 41, 217
 Bonesana, Bishop of Como: 249
 Boniface IV of Monferrato, Marquis: 50
 Bordiga, Ignazio Gaudenzio: 76, 80, 264
 Borromeo, Carlo, Archbishop of Milan, St:
 105, 109, 113, 115–29, 133, 137, 141,
 143, 182, 184, 205–06, 210, 252–58
 Borromeo, Federico, Archbishop of Milan:
 108, 125, 128–32, 156, 205, 236–37,
 243, 255–58
 Borromeo, Giberto, Bishop of Novara: 186
 Borsetti, Bartolomeo: 183
 Bourbon, dynasty: 175–76
 Bramante, Donato: 209
 Brasca, Santo: 46
 Brentano, Bernardo: 248
 Brentano-Moretto, family: 248
 Brill, Paul: 129
 Brizio, Anna Maria: 16, 77
 Brockedon, William: 8
 Brueghel, Jan the Elder: 129
 Burckhardt, Jacob: 4, 6
 Busca, Antonio: 215–16, 240–41
 Bussola, Cesare: 185
 Bussola, Dionigi: 182, 184–85, 213–15,
 240–41, 244, 260
 Butler, Samuel: xii, 1–17, 19–20, 69–70,
 77, 89, 134, 140, 159, 218, 229, 235,
 259, 265, 267

 Caccia, Guglielmo (Il Moncalvo): 220
 Caccia, Opicino (Tiberino): 73–74
 Caiaphas: 103, 113, 141–42, 145,
 146 n. 57, 156, 237, 239
 Caimi, Bartolomeo: 43
 Caimi, Bernardino: 20, 28, 34, 39, 41–60,
 64–69, 71, 82, 86, 93–94, 97–98, 101,
 103, 105, 113, 118, 125, 132, 145, 155,
 161–62, 166, 182, 184, 198, 203, 205,
 207, 257–58, 265
 Cain: 157
 Caissotti, Carlo, Marquis: 192
 Calderini, Pietro: 16, 266–67
 Calixtus III, Pope: 43
 Canetta, family: 231

 Canobio, Amico: 208–10
 canons of San Gaudenzio (Varallo): 180,
 196, 197 n. 63
 canons of San Giulio (Orta): 207–08
 canons of San Stefano (Biella): 222–25, 229
 canons of Sant'Eufemia: 249
 canons, Lateran: 219, 221
 Capis, Giovanni Matteo: 242–45, 259
 Capuchins: 208–10, 242, 259
 Carafino, Bishop of Como: 248–49
 Carassi, Marco: xii
 Caravaggio: 76, 129, 141, 152, 154
 Carcano, family: 236
 Carello, Giuseppe: 29
 Carestia, Antonio: 267
 Carlos II, King of Spain: 175
 Carracci, family: 4
 Castellanza, family: 91
 Caterina da Pallanza, Beata: 232
 Caterina, Infanta: 114, 124
 Cesari, Giuseppe: 141
 Cetti, Andrea: 248
 Charles Albert, King of Sardinia: 263
 Charles Emanuel I, Duke of Savoy: 29, 93,
 114–15, 124–25, 131, 152, 163, 221,
 224–25, 253
 Charles Emanuel II, Duke of Savoy: 225
 Charles Emanuel III, King of Sardinia: 25,
 187, 190–93, 200–01, 262
 Charles Emanuel IV, King of Sardinia: 221
 Charles II, King of England: 171
 Charles the Fat, Carolingian Emperor: 21
 Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor: 61, 71, 74
 Charles VIII, King of France: 7
 Cid, Maria Tecla: 234
 Claire, St: 212–13
 Clement IX, Pope: 179–80
 Clement VIII, Pope: 128, 131–32
 Clement XIII, Pope: 201
 Clement XIV, Pope: 201
 Cole, Eliza: 9
 Cole, Sir Henry: 9
 Colombo, Giuseppe: 265
 Conrad II, Holy Roman Emperor: 21, 35
 Conrad III, Holy Roman Emperor: 21
 Conzi, Cherubino: 58
 Costelloe, Mary: 70
 Crespi, Giovanni Battista (Il Cerano): 141,
 156, 255

- Cumino, Domenico: 229
Cusa, Michele: 264
- d'Adda, family: 37, 100, 127–28, 131, 179, 187, 259
d'Adda, Gerolamo Maria: 127, 172, 182, 187
d'Adda, Giacomo: 52, 99–101, 109–13, 118–21, 127, 133, 137, 162, 189
d'Adda, Giorgio: 127, 182
d'Adda, Giovanni Antonio: 127
d'Adda, Giuseppe: 187, 189, 197
d'Adda, Livia: 187
See also Salvaterra d'Adda, Scarognini d'Adda
- d'Amboise, Charles Chaumont: 61
da Cassano, Gioacchino: 242
da Castelletto Ticino, Cleto: 210–12
da Claino, Michelangelo Rossetti: 124
da Feltre, Bernardino: 43
da Firenze, Tommaso: 68–69
da Marignano, Francesco: 60, 65
da Milano, Benedetto: 165
da Montiglio, Michel Angelo: 250
Dani, Ludovico: 191
Daniel: 155
da Rho, Andrea: 242
Darius: 155
da San Germano, Fedele: 224, 226
da Varallo, Tanzio. *See* d'Enrico, Antonio
de Avalos, Don Alonso: 114
de Beauharnais, Eugène: 262–63
Debiaggi, Casimiro: 16, 77
de Challant, Ibleto: 23
de Córdoba, Alvaro: 67
de' Donati, Giovanni Ambrogio: 60
de' Donati, Giovanni Pietro: 60
De Filippis, Elena: xii, 16, 77
de Lautrec, Vicomte (Odet de Foix): 74
della Cerva, Giovanni Battista: 76, 92
della Porta, Guglielmo: 237
dell'Arca, Niccolo: 59
della Rovere, brothers: 150, 155, 212, 260
della Rovere, Gian (Giovan) Mauro: 136, 146, 238
della Rovere, Giovanni Battista: 136, 146
d'Enrico, family: 31, 92, 96, 145
d'Enrico, Antonio (Tanzio): 16, 31, 145, 150–52, 154–55, 161, 260
d'Enrico, Enrico (Ulrico): 145
d'Enrico, Giacomo: 145
d'Enrico, Giovanni: 12, 55, 81, 96, 145–52, 154–62, 165, 181, 184, 213, 226, 260
d'Enrico, Melchiorre il Giovane: 145–46, 152, 161, 226, 260
d'Enrico, Melchiorre il Vecchio: 145, 220
d'Este, Beatrice: 47
Devigne, Marguerite: 14
de Wespín, Jean. *See* Tabacchetti
de Wespín, Nicola, 141
di Gattinara, Mercurino Arborio: 61
di Lagna, Santini: 217
di Sartirana, Margherita Beccaria: 221
di Valperga, Guido, Count: 250
di Valsolda, Cristoforo Bargnola: 124
Doneda, brothers: 185
Doneda, Giuseppe: 182
d'Ormea, Marquis: 190–91
Draghetti, family: 24, 73, 173
Draghetti, Francesco: 53, 98
Draghetti, Gaudenzio: 32–33
Draghetti, Giovanni Angelo: 65, 98
Durio, Alberto: 16 n. 55, 62
Durio, Costantino: 16, 267
- Eastlake, Sir Charles: 5 n. 7, 9
Eastlake, Lady Elizabeth: 6, 9
Elijah: 182, 212
Emanuel Filibert, Duke of Savoy: 117, 123–24
Eufemia (Euphemia), St: 247
Eugene of Savoy, Prince: 175, 178
Eugenius IV, Pope: 43
Eusebius, Bishop of Vercelli: 218–23
Eve: 95, 109–10, 120, 136, 220
- fabbricieri*, at Ghiffa: 230
at Orta: 208, 212, 214–15
at Ossuccio: 249
at Varallo: 65–66, 76, 97–98, 113n, 118–21, 124–25, 127–28, 130, 132–33, 136, 139–40, 144, 161–62, 166, 184, 187, 189, 194–203
at Varese: 236–37
Fabri, Felix: 46
Falconi, Bernardo: 215
Falletti di Barolo, Tancredi, Marquis: 265

- Fassola, family: 24, 27, 169, 245
 Fassola, Antonio: 169
 Fassola, Francesco: 169
 Fassola, Giovanni Battista Feliciano:
 25–27, 29, 32, 34, 98, 132,
 169–73, 267
 Faure, Gabriel: 13
 Ferrari, Federico: 217
 Ferrari, Gaudenzio: 4–6, 11–16, 57, 59, 65,
 68, 76–93, 96–97, 103, 134–36, 139,
 141, 149, 152, 154, 157, 159–60, 237,
 239–41, 249, 260, 264–67
 Ferrari, Giovanni Giacomo, Canon: 138
 Ferrata, Ercole: 184
 Ferrero-Fieschi, Besso, Marquis: 124
 Ferro, Giacomo: 156, 161, 212
 Festing Jones, Henry: 8, 11
 Ffoulkes, Constance Jocelyn: 13
 Forbes, James David: 8
 Forster, E.M.: 8
 Francis I, King of France: 71, 73–74
 Francis of Assisi, St: xi, 42, 59, 207, 209–17
 Freedberg, David: 96
- Galante Garrone, Virginia: 59
 Galeazzo Maria Visconti, Duke of Milan: 232
 Galletti, Ignazio Amedeo: 229
 Galliari, Fabbrizio: 254
 Galliari, Giovanni: 226
 Galloni, Pietro: 12–14, 16, 267
 Garavaglia, Gianpaolo: xii, 17, 37
 Garrone, Ferdinando: 250
 Gastaldi, Giuseppe: 253
 Gaudenzio. *See* Ferrari, Gaudenzio
 Gentile, Guido: xii, 17
 Gherardini, Melchiorre (Il Ceranino): 156–57
 Giacobini, Benedetto: 179–81, 197
 Gianoli, Pier Francesco: 150, 160–61
 Gilardi, Pietro: 241
 Gilardone, family: 248
 Gill, Rebecca: xii
 Gillet, Louis: 13
 Giordano, Alberto: 73–74
 Giuliana da Busto Arsizio, Beata: 232
 Godio, Alessandro: 13
 Gonzaga, family: 50, 219
 Gonzaga, Fabio: 221
 Gonzaga, Vincenzo I, Duke of Mantua: 259
 Gorla, Bishop of Vercelli: 224–25
- Grandi, brothers: 161
 Grattarola, Marco Aurelio: 254–57
 Gregory XIII, Pope: 118–19
- Habsburg, dynasty: 25, 175–77, 190,
 245, 261
 Halsey, Ethel: 13, 77
 Hannibal: 8
 Herod: 113, 135, 141–43, 145, 154–55, 239
- Ignatius Loyola, St: 46–47, 94
 Igonotto, Giacomo: 124
 Inguaggiato, Franco: xi
 Innocent III, Pope: 209, 212
 Innocent V, Pope: 217
 Innocent VIII, Pope: 48–49, 52
 Innocent XI, Pope: 243
 Isaac: 137–38, 157
- Jacob: 157
 Jesus Christ: 10, 12, 14, 41, 42, 44–46, 49,
 52 n. 35, 55–59, 61–64, 68–69, 80–82,
 85–87, 89, 91, 93–96, 103, 110, 114,
 117–18, 120–21, 124–25, 133, 137–43,
 144 n. 53, 146–61, 163, 182–84, 186,
 207, 209, 212–13, 215–16, 221–22,
 231, 237–41, 243–46, 248, 250 n. 136,
 251–53, 258, 264
- Job: 213
 John, St: 139–40, 157, 159, 244
 John the Baptist: 51, 231
 Joseph, husband of Mary: 80, 91
 Joseph, son of Jacob: 157
 Joseph of Arimathea: 157
 Joseph I, Holy Roman Emperor: 180
 Joseph II, Holy Roman Emperor: 201
 Judas Iscariot: 155, 238–39
 Julius II, Pope: 60
 Julius III, Pope: 69
 Juvarra, Filippo: 187, 227, 259
- King, Samuel: 9, 30, 217
 Kugler, Franz: 6, 77
- Lampugnani, Giovan Battista: 238
 Lampugnani, Giovan Francesco: 238
 Larbaud, Valéry: 13
 Layard, Sir Austen Henry: 6, 77
 Lazzaro, Tommaso: 245

- Legnani, Stefano Maria (Il Legnanino): 241
 Leo X, Pope: 69
 Leopold, Grand Duke of Tuscany: 201
 Leopold I, Holy Roman Emperor: 175–76
 Leva, Francesco: 186
 Litta, family: 236
 Loisi, Bernardino: 28
 Lomazzo, Giovanni Paolo: 76, 92, 264
 Longo, Pier Giorgio: 17
 Louis XII, King of France: 50, 71
 Louis XIV, King of France: 171, 175, 177
 Louis XV, King of France: 200
 Luini, Cesare: 167
- Maestri, Giovanni Battista (Il Volpino): 244
 Maffioli, Giulio Antonio: 209, 211
 Maggi, Cesare: 74–75
 Maio, Giuseppe: 52
 Mallé, Luigi: 16, 77
 Manauft, Johann Blasius: 170
 Manzoni, Alessandro: 246
 Marchesano, Louis: xii
 Margaret of Antioch, St: 219
 Margherita, Queen of Italy: 267
 Maria Cristina, Duchess of Savoy: 225, 253
 Martelli, Giovanni Antonio: 210–11
 Martinolio, Cristoforo: 150, 155–56
 Mary (Virgin): 44, 57–58, 60, 62, 64–65, 68, 75, 80, 85–86, 91, 99, 116, 118, 121, 125, 139–41, 157 n. 77, 159, 161–62, 165, 167 n. 107, 168, 181–86, 188–89, 197, 207–08, 212–13, 216, 218–24, 226–29, 231–34, 241, 244–45, 247–53
 Mary Magdalene: 55, 64, 139–40, 159, 240, 244
 Massino, Costantino: 219–20
 Matacci, family: 167
 Matilda, Marchioness of Pianezza: 124
 Maurizio of Savoy, Cardinal: 225, 227
 Mazzone, Piera: xii
 Mazzoni, Guido: 59
 Mazzucchelli, Pier Francesco. *See* Morazzone
 Mellerio, Giacomo: 246
 Merici, Angela, of Desenzano, St: 114–15
 Michelangelo: 14, 76, 100, 105 n. 63, 124, 140, 146, 159
 Miloda, Giovanni Battista: 29
- Molinari, Lorenzo: 248
 Morazzone (Pier Francesco Mazzucchelli): 138, 141, 150–52, 154–55, 182, 212, 237, 239, 260
 Morgiazzi, family: 167–69, 173
 Morigia, family: 231
 Morondi, Giovanni Battista: 183
 Morone, Girolamo: 61, 82, 93
 Morozzo della Rocca, Giuseppe, Bishop of Novara: 246
 Moses: 157, 182
 Muratori, Ludovico Antonio: 180–81
- Nazari di Calabiana, Archbishop of Milan: 222
 Negri, Dionigi: 10, 16, 267
 Negri, Francesco: 14
 Neri, Filippo, St: 128
 Nicodemus: 157
 Nicolao, St: 208
 Nietzsche, Friedrich: 218
 Ninguarda, Bishop of Como: 247
 Nova, Alessandro: 93–94
 Nuvolone, Carlo Francesco: 213, 260
 Nuvolone, Giuseppe: 213, 260
- Observant Franciscans: 20, 28, 35, 41–45, 47–49, 51, 53–55, 58–60, 62, 65–66, 68, 93, 97–99, 109, 113, 118–21, 125, 127, 130–33, 136, 138, 154, 194, 208, 222, 250–51, 257–58
 Observant Franciscans, Reformed: 162, 165, 169, 180, 194–203, 242, 263
 Odescalchi, Giulio Maria, Bishop of Novara: 243
 Omodei, family: 236
 Onofrio of Gattinara, Count: 221
 Orgiazzi, Antonio: 184
 Orgiazzi, Rocco: 194
 Otto III, Holy Roman Emperor: 21
 Ouroussov, Marie: 13
- Paleologo, family: 50, 219
 Paleologo, Guglielmo VIII, Marquis of Monferrato: 219
 Paleotti, Gabriele, Archbishop of Bologna: 128, 137
 Paoluccio dei Trinci of Foligno: 42
 Parella, Marchioness of: 184

- Pater, Walter: 5–7, 13, 77
 Paul III, Pope: 99
 Paul V, Pope: 236
 Pauli, Gustav: 13
 Pellico, Silvio: 263, 265
 Penna, Carlo: 186
 Perini, Pier Maria: 246
 Peter, St: 238
 Petera, Pietro Francesco: 182
 Philip II, King of Spain: 71, 114, 124, 126
 Philip V, King of Spain: 175
 Pigeon, Anna: 8
 Pigeon, Ellen: 8
 Pius IV, Pope: 116
 Pius V, Pope: 234
podestà of the Val Sesia: 23–27, 36–37, 50, 53, 166–68, 172–73, 176
 Pombia, Counts of: 21
 Pontius Pilate: 44, 103, 105, 113, 141–43, 145–46, 148–50, 153–55, 157, 159–61, 237, 239, 246
 Pontius Pilate's wife: 155
 Ponzzone, Pietro Martire, Bishop of Novara: 209, 230
 Prestinari, Cristoforo: 211–12, 220, 236–37
 Prestinari, Marco Antonio: 211, 236
 Prestinari, Michele: 120, 134, 136–37, 146, 211, 220
 Preti, Giacomo (Giacomaccio): 72–74
pretore of the Val Sesia: 176–77, 180–81, 189–91, 193, 201–02, 262
 Procaccini, Giulio Cesare: 141, 209

 Raineri, Giovanni Luca: 246
 Ranzio, family: 167
 Ranzo, Candido: 60–61
 Raphael: 76, 80, 264
 Ravelli, family: 114
 Ravelli, Anselmo: 114, 161
 Ravelli, Bartolomeo: 161–62
 Ravelli, Gaudenzio: 161
 Ravelli, Lorenzo: 196–97
 Ravelli, Marc Antonio: 26
 Ravelli, Pietro: 65, 114, 161
 Recchi, Giovan Battista: 239
 Recchi, Giovan Paolo: 239
 Rée, Paul: 218
 Retti, Martino: 237
 Richini, Francesco Maria: 255

 Ridolfi, Enrico: 69
 Roch, St: 223
 Romano, Giovanni: 16, 77
 Rosmini, Antonio: 246
 Rossetti, Michelangelo: 146
 Rovero di Sanseverino, Ignazio, Bishop of Novara: 199
 Rucellai, Giovanni: 67
 Ruskin, John: 5, 6 n. 11
 Rusnati, Giuseppe: 215, 245

 Sabeian, David: xi
 Sacchi, Rossana: 16, 77
 Salvaterra d'Adda, family: 187
 Satan: 213
 Savage, Edna: 10
 Savoia-Racconigi, Claudia, Marchioness: 124
 Scarognini, family: 24, 37, 49–52, 73, 100, 259
 Scarognini, Antonio: 51
 Scarognini, Francesca: 52, 99, 113, 189
 Scarognini, Francesco: 53
 Scarognini, Giovanni Antonio: 52, 65, 98–99
 Scarognini, Marco: 50
 Scarognini, Milano: 48–53, 60, 65–66, 72, 76, 97–98, 162, 203, 208–09, 242
 Scarognini d'Adda, family: 36–37
 Scotto, Stefano: 12, 80, 89
 Selim I, Sultan: 46
 Serbelloni, Gabriele, Marquis: 167–68
 Sesalli, Francesco: 113–14
 Sforza, dukes of Milan: 25, 99
 Sforza, Francesco II: 71, 74
 Sforza, Gian Galeazzo: 47
 Sforza, Ludovico (Il Moro): 47, 50, 52, 59–60, 71–72
 Sforza, Massimiliano: 50, 71
 Shearman, John: 96
 Silva, Agostino: 237, 248–49
 Silva, Francesco: 237–39, 248–49
 Simon of Cyrene: 138–40, 246
 Sixtus IV, Pope: 232
 Sixtus V, Pope: 120, 125, 127, 130, 143, 220
 Snider, Timoteo: 248–49
 Soldo, Gaudenzio (Giovanni): 182
 Spanzotti, Martino: 80
 Stacey, Peter: xii

- Stefani Perrone, Stefania: 16
 Stella, Fermo: 85
 Stephen, Leslie: 9
 Stricchi, Vivaldo: 68
- Tabacchetti (Jean de Wespín): 12–15, 70,
 92, 96, 120, 136–41, 157, 185, 220,
 239, 259–60
- Tantardini, Carlo Antonio: 183
- Termine, Carlo Francesco: 226
- Terpstra, Nicholas: xii
- Testori, Giovanni: 16, 77, 152, 154, 155
- Tibaldi, Pellegrino: 101, 113, 118, 210, 235
- Tizzoni, Gerolamo: 61
- Tobias: 213
- Tonetti, Federico: 16, 38, 80, 267
- Topini, Carlo: 10
- Tornielli, Antonio, Bishop of Novara: 162,
 214
- Torriani, Bishop of Como: 249
- Toscanella, Marcantonio: 225
- Trincano, Andrea, Canon: 248–49
- Trincano, Giovanni Antonio: 248
- Trivulzio, Margherita: 128
- Vandoni, Bartolomeo: 238
- van Scorel, Jan: 46
- Vasari, Giorgio: 6–7, 76
- Vela, Spartaco: 10
- Vellotti, Nicolao: 251–53
- Viale, Vittorio: 16
- Viazzo, Pier Paolo: 17
- vicinanza* of Varallo: 20, 22, 36–39, 48,
 53–55, 60, 65, 71–74, 98–100, 109,
 118–21, 125, 130–32, 169, 177, 194,
 196, 198–203, 207–08
- Victor Amadeus I, Duke of Savoy: 164
- Victor Amadeus II, Duke of Savoy and King
 of Sardinia: 25, 173, 175–77, 179–81,
 189–90, 193, 198, 201, 227
- Victor Amadeus III, King of Sardinia:
 193–94, 228
- Victor Emanuel I, King of Sardinia: 262
- Vinzio, Giovanni Pietro: 72–73
- Visconti, Dukes of Milan: 25, 190
- Visconti, Filippo Maria: 25, 36, 191
- Visconti, Giangaleazzo: 25, 191
- Visconti, Giovanni Battista, Bishop of
 Novara: 179
- Vittone, Bernardo Antonio: 253–54, 259
- von Breydenbach, Bernhard: 46
- von Stockalper, Kaspar Jodok: 245
- von Zahn, Albert: 4–6, 12, 77
- Walser, communities: 21, 31, 33, 167n
- Weeks, Lord Edward: 13
- Weykonath, Claudius: xii
- Wharton, Annabel: 95
- Wharton, Edith: 13, 69–70, 77
- Wittkower, Rudolf: 16
- Zuccaro, Federico: 94, 108, 129

INDEX OF PLACES

- Abruzzi: 114, 152
 Alagna: 20–21, 30–31, 50, 124, 145, 164, 178, 192
 Alessandria: 176, 221
 Alexandria: 45
 Andorno: 226
 Arona: 10, 92, 115, 117, 152, 206–07, 251–57, 258
 Asia Minor: 15
 Asti: 250
 Austria: 175
 Azzano: 248

 Bassano: 197
 Bavaria: 66
 Bellinzona: 10
 Belmonte: 17, 122, 206, 231, 243, 249–51
 Bethlehem, in Palestine: 44, 67, 91, 94–95
 Bethlehem complex, Sacro Monte of Varallo: 55, 58, 62, 101, 209
 Biandrate: 21–22, 23
 Biella: 218, 222–26, 228–29, 251, 266
 Boccioleto: 72
 Bologna: 4, 59, 66
 Bomarzo: 108
 Borgomanero: 43
 Borgosesia: 20–24, 161, 165, 176, 178–79, 266
 Bosnia: 59
 Brianza: 99
 Brig: 245
 Bruges: 67
 Brugliano: 42
 Busano: 250

 Cagliari: 218
 Cairo: 46
 Calabria: 47
 Calonico: 10
 Calvary, Mount, at Graglia: 252
 in Jerusalem: 44, 82, 143
 at Sacro Monte of Varallo: 57, 82, 269
 Campertogno: 21, 160, 178
 Candia: 46
 Candia Lomellina: 221
 Canobbio: 92
 Casale: 219, 222
 Castelfiorentino: 69
 Cedron, Brook: 48
 Cellio: 178
 Chambéry: 117
 Colma, Pass: 21, 217
 Como: 92, 152, 215, 239, 245, 247–49, 260
 Lake Como: 10, 124, 247, 254
 Constantinople: 45
 Córdoba: 67
 Corfu: 46
 Cravagliana: 172
 Crea: 12–14, 17, 93–94, 122, 141, 185, 206, 218–22, 226, 228, 232, 237, 247, 249, 258–60
 Crete: 46, 68
 Crevacuore, Pass: 21
 Cressa: 180
 Crevola: 24
 Cyprus: 46

 Dalmatia: 46, 59, 67
 Damascus: 45

- Damietta: 217
 Dinant: 14
 Disneyland: 95
 Domodossola: 3, 17, 122, 152, 185, 206,
 215, 231, 242–46, 258–60
 Dutch Republic: 175

 Escalaceli: 67

 Faido: 3, 10
 Faucigny: 31
 Ferrara: 59
 Florence: 3, 7, 59, 67, 77
 Fobello: 73–74, 180
 Fruttuaria: 250

 Galilee: 45
 Gattinara: 72
 Genoa: 100
 Gethsemane, in Jerusalem: 44
 at Sacro Mont of Varallo: 55–56, 143,
 146, 183–84, 238, 248
 Ghiffa: 17, 122, 206, 229–32, 243
 Golgotha: 57, 86
 Görlitz: 67
 Graglia: 206, 251–57, 258–59
 Gressoney: 31

 Haarlem: 46
 Haute-Maurienne: 31
 Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem, replicas: 41,
 67–69

 Isola Comacina: 247–48
 Ivrea: 80

 Jaffa: 46
 Jericho: 45
 Jerusalem: 20, 41, 44–47, 49, 55–58, 61,
 66–69, 82, 93–95, 97, 103, 110, 118,
 125, 133, 138, 143, 154–55, 183, 215,
 239, 243, 246, 253
 Jerusalem, New (Varallo): 34, 39, 41–42,
 45, 47–48, 68, 109, 134, 166, 252

 Lenno: 248
 Lepanto: 234
 Leventina: 3
 Ligorretto: 10
 Lodi: 99

 Lombardy: 1, 3, 19–20, 22, 24, 35, 47,
 72, 74, 76–77, 91, 98, 114, 123, 128,
 136, 141, 156, 160, 164, 172, 175–76,
 181–82, 184, 189, 207, 210, 214–15,
 234, 257, 259–61
 Lomellina: 176
 Loreto, Santa Casa: 58, 67–68, 117, 235,
 245, 252
 Lorraine: 180
 Lugano, Lake: 239
 Lusatia: 67

 Macugnaga: 31, 183
 Maggiore, Lake: 10, 43, 92, 115, 229, 252,
 255
 Mantua: 50
 Masserano: 124, 180
 Mastallone, River: 20, 35–37, 48, 50, 73, 266
 Mastallone, Valley: 180
 Melegnano: 126
 Milan: xi, 3, 19, 25–27, 37, 43–45, 47, 50,
 53, 61–62, 66, 71, 73–74, 76, 92, 99,
 114–19, 122–23, 125–26, 128–29,
 141, 160, 163–64, 166, 168–69, 172,
 175–78, 180, 182, 184, 190–91,
 195–96, 202, 205, 215, 236, 257–61
 Mondovì: 224
 Monferrato: 14, 50, 92, 141, 163, 189, 219,
 221
 Montaione: 68–69
 Monte Rosa: 20
 Montrigone: 161, 165
 Monza: 234
 Morbegno: 92
 Mount Lebanon: 45
 Mount of Olives, in Jerusalem: 44, 46,
 at Sacro Monte of Varallo: 55–56, 95
 Mount Tabor, in Palestine: 45
 at Graglia: 252
 at Sacro Monte of Varallo: 182, 184
 Mount Zion, at Sacro Monte of Varallo: 55,
 57, 65

 Nagasaki: 154
 Nancy: 180
 Naples: 3, 50, 59, 71
 Nazareth, in Palestine: 44, 55, 58
 at Sacro Monte of Varallo: 62, 67, 94,
 253, 269

- Novara: xi, 13, 20–21, 23, 25, 27–28, 30,
 51, 55, 66, 72, 74, 92, 99, 113, 121,
 123, 125, 127, 132, 152, 155, 160,
 162, 177–81, 190, 194–95, 199–203,
 208–10, 218, 230, 243, 246, 263, 266
- Oropa: 10, 17, 31, 93, 122, 146, 161, 165,
 199, 201, 206, 218, 222–29, 232, 247,
 249, 251–53, 258–60
- Orta: xi, 17, 21, 27, 31, 43, 93, 122, 146,
 152, 161, 183, 185, 206–18, 221, 231,
 236–37, 240, 242, 244, 247, 258–60
- Ossuccio: 122, 206, 247–49, 250
- Otranto: 46
- Palestine: 41, 44–47, 67–68, 162, 218, 252
- Pavia: 152, 162, 185
- Perugia: 80, 100, 110
- Piedmont: 1, 17, 19, 47, 74, 123, 164–65,
 175–78, 249, 252–53, 261–62
- Pisa: 66
- Ponzano Monferrato: 17
- Quarona: 21, 24, 261
- Rassa: 24, 246
- Rhodes: 46, 90
- Riva Valdobbia: 31
- Roccapietra: 68, 155
- Romagnano Sesia: 21, 43, 72, 92, 167, 169
- Rome: xi, 3, 7, 19, 29–31, 47, 74, 77, 80,
 100, 129, 140, 143–46, 152, 160, 195
- Ronco: 230, 232
- Rossura: 11
- Saas Fee: 14
- Sabbia: 29
- Saint Gotthard Pass: 10
- San Giulio: 208
- San Michele, monastery: 10
- San Quirico: 73
- San Vivaldo: 68–70, 94
- Saronno: 92, 117
- Savoy: 19, 25, 29, 31–32, 93, 123–25,
 131, 163–64, 173, 175–78, 182–83,
 187, 189–90, 193–95, 198–201, 221,
 223–25, 227, 239, 253, 259, 261–62
- Scopa: 21, 23
- Sesia, River: 20, 262, 266
- Sesia-Joch: 8
- Sinai: 45
- Sossana: 248
- Spurano: 248
- Tarentaise: 31
- Teramo: 114
- Ticino, Canton: 10
- Trento: 43
- Turin: xi–xii, 10, 29, 117, 123, 152, 169,
 172, 176–77, 181, 183, 189, 191, 193,
 199, 200, 202, 221, 239, 250, 262
- Tuscany: 7, 68
- Tyre: 45
- Umbria: 42
- Valais: 21, 31, 245
- Val d'Aosta: 20–21, 23, 27, 31, 164, 180,
 192–93, 222
- Val d'Intelvi: 245
- Val di Rassa: 169, 171
- Val d'Ossola: 20, 25, 27, 31, 183, 242
- Valduggia: 21, 23, 72, 76, 92, 145
- Valenza: 176
- Valesio: 248
- Valperga: 249–51
- Val Sassina: 183, 254
- Val Sesia: 1, 7–8, 10, 12, 14–17, 19–38,
 43, 48–51, 61, 66, 71–74, 76–77,
 123, 125, 136
- Varallo, church of San Gaudenzio: 36, 38,
 75, 160, 165, 169, 180, 196–97, 263
- Monastery of Santa Maria delle Grazie:
 43, 49, 51–53, 62, 74, 80, 85–86,
 89 n. 33, 130–32, 154, 162, 173, 180,
 201–02, 263, 265
- Varallo, Sacro Monte: 4–6, 9–14, 17, 20, 29,
 41, 43–45, 47–50, 52, 54–68, 71–75,
 93–101, 112–14, 117–25, 131–32,
 161–63, 177, 181–88, 205–09,
 211–12, 219–28, 231–32, 235–43,
 247, 249, 252, 257–60, 263–65
- Basilica of the Virgin: 64, 161–63, 168,
 182, 184–89, 197
- Fountain of the Risen Christ: 62–64, 81,
 103, 115, 143, 163, 183, 186
- Jehoshaphat, Valley: 55, 58, 62, 162
- Palace of Pilate: 143, 145, 146, 150,
 154–55, 159–60

- Piazza dei Tribunali: 125, 142–45, 154,
 156, 163, 183
 Piazza della Basilica (Piazza Giovanni
 Paolo II): 163, 183
 Porta Aurea: 184
 Temple of Solomon: 112
 Tomb of Joachim and Anna: 58, 62
 Tomb of the Virgin: 58, 62, 80, 162
 Varallo, Sacro Monte, chapels
 Adoration of the Shepherds: 58, 80–81, 91
 Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane: 62,
 117, 146, 183–84
 Annunciation: 58, 62, 67, 80
 Anointment of the Dead Christ: 57
 Ascension: 53, 56, 93, 95, 118
 Ascent to Calvary: 12, 14, 96, 124, 136–41,
 143, 150, 154, 157, 159, 237
 Assumption of the Virgin: 57–58, 60, 65,
 161–62
 Baptism of Christ: 110 n. 69, 118
 Christ and the Samaritan Woman:
 110 n. 69, 133
 Christ Before Annas: 183
 Christ Before Caiaphas: 156
 Christ Before Herod: 154–55
 Christ Led to the Praetorium: 159–60
 Christ Waking the Sleeping Disciples:
 146, 184
 Christ's First Appearance Before Pilate:
 153–54
 Christ's Second Appearance Before Pilate:
 159, 161
 Circumcision, or Presentation: 58, 62, 81
 Condemnation of Christ: 62, 143,
 150–51
 Crowning with Thorns: 146–47
 Crucifixion: 4, 11–12, 14, 57, 62, 65, 76,
 80, 82–92, 96, 103, 124, 135–36,
 139, 141, 143, 149, 154, 157,
 159–60, 237, 240–41, 249
 Curing of the Paralytic: 110 n. 69,
 148 n. 60, 155
 Deposition: 12, 83, 85, 138, 143, 157–58
 Descent of the Holy Spirit: 57
 Ecce Homo: 96, 146, 148–50, 154, 162, 237
 Entry into Jerusalem: 111 n. 69, 133
 Fall of Man: 109–11, 120, 136–37
 Flagellation: 146–47, 155
 Flight into Egypt: 110 n. 69, 133
 Holy Sepulchre: 49–50, 52–58, 60–62,
 64, 66, 75, 81, 83, 93–94, 97, 103,
 117, 143, 157, 182
 Inferno: 94
 Jesus and the Samaritan Woman: 144
 Joseph's First Dream: 133
 Joseph's Second Dream: 111 n. 69
 Last Supper: 57–58, 62, 115, 141,
 183–85
 Laying of Christ in the Shroud: 157
 Magi: 58, 80, 85, 91–92
 Massacre of the Innocents: 96, 115, 124,
 133, 135–36, 139, 145, 150
 Nailing to the Cross: 83, 85, 124, 136,
 138, 139 n. 45, 157
 Nativity: 58, 60n. 54, 62, 80–81, 93
 Pietà: 143, 157, 159–60
 Pilate Washing His Hands: 154–55
 Presentation in the Temple, or Circum-
 cision: 58, 62, 81, 95, 111 n. 69
 Raising of Lazarus: 110 n. 69, 133
 Raising of the Son of the Widow of
 Naim: 110 n. 69, 124, 133
 Sacrifice of Isaac: 137
 Taking of Christ: 114, 137, 159, 182
 Temptation of Christ: 111 n. 69, 137
 Transfiguration: 57 n. 40, 110–11 n. 69,
 182
 Varallo, town: 1, 9–10, 12, 15–17, 20–29,
 31, 34–39, 48, 51–53, 59, 72–52,
 98–100, 114, 130, 161, 165–69,
 171–73, 176–81, 193–94, 199–202,
 217, 244, 261, 265–67
 Varese: 3, 10, 93, 117, 122, 140, 152, 185,
 206–07, 215, 232–42, 243–44, 247,
 249, 251, 255, 258–60
 Venice: 3, 7, 46
 Vercelli: 21, 23, 30, 36, 43, 92, 218, 220,
 222–24
 Vezzolano: 219
 Vicoforte: 224
 Vigevano: 92
 Villa d'Este: 108
 Zurich: 31

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